Guitar & Bass JUNE 2015

Guitar & Bass

The Magic of the Strat

A forensic examination of the art and science behind the world's most famous guitar

PLUS!
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Godin British Bass Greats
Italia Private Collection
TC Helicon and more...

New Cort and Ibanez reviews

Dave Hill
The Slade legend's Sam Li Custom guitar

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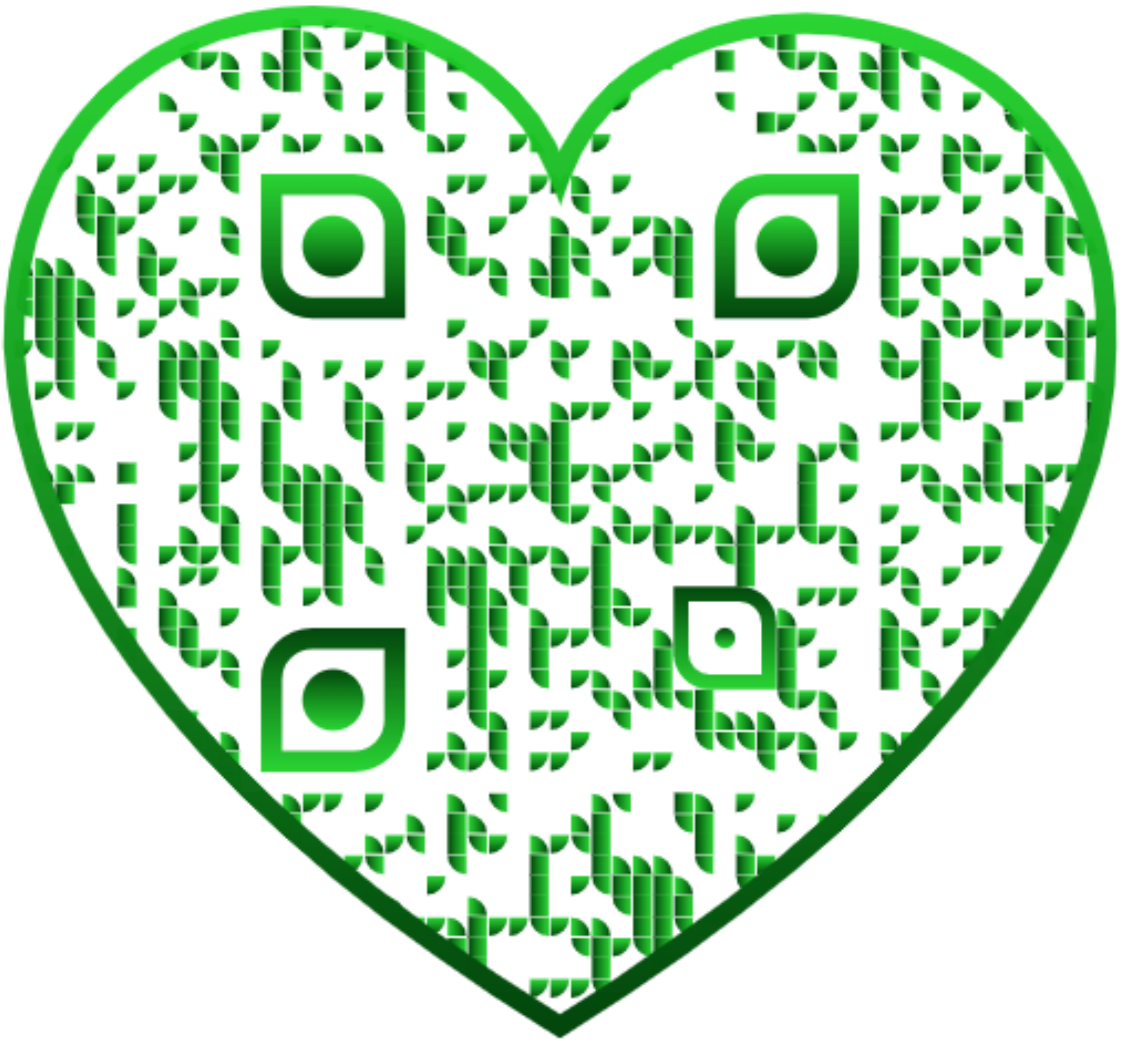

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The heart of the matter...

If I'd been given a pound every time somebody's asked a member of the *Guitar & Bass* team 'what's so good about Strats?', I'd be a fair bit richer than I am now. It's not the kind of question you can answer with a soundbite, but it's a fine question – and one that deserves a proper answer. So this month we've set out to explain the many qualities and delights of the Fender Stratocaster, going into detail regarding just what it is about Leo's most popular creation that has held so many musicians in its thrall for so many years.

In this bumper gear issue, potential purchasers and gear lovers from all walks of life can mosey on down to reviews of offerings from the likes of Marshall, Godin, Cort and Ibanez, to name but a few. We also get some quality time with the ever-exploratory Steve Hackett, and try to discover why so many British bass legends (including the sadly departed Andy Fraser and Jack Bruce) favoured a Gibson bass guitar to get their sound.

Our vintage section this month includes a tasty, acoustic-heavy Private Collection, while Slade legend Dave Hill allows our man Steve Clarke to inspect and dissect one of his treasured axes. As always, our website www.guitar-bass.net is on hand to top up your guitar needs, and you can always check us out on Facebook and Twitter (@GuitarMagazine). For now, we wish you success in all your guitar endeavours – and we hope you enjoy the issue...

In this issue

June 2015 Vol 26 No 09

14 THE MAGIC OF THE STRAT

The 60 year-old electric guitar design that still ticks almost every box

COVER STORY

Artists

The Boom Band 24
A UK blues collective boasting no less than four guitarists and a clutch of irresistible tunes

Steve Hackett 30
The ex-Genesis man talks of the 'tyranny of volume' and his innovative playing

Vintage

How the Gibson bass helped shape British rock music 36
Jack Bruce, Andy Fraser, Chas Chandler and more all chose Gibson. We investigate why

Private Collection 82
Len Leslie loves to rescue a neglected guitar and bring it back to life. Over five pages, he guides us through some of his triumphs

Bishop Of Denmark Street 91
Sid Bishop gets philosophical about the potential goals of the devoted guitar player

30 STEVE HACKETT

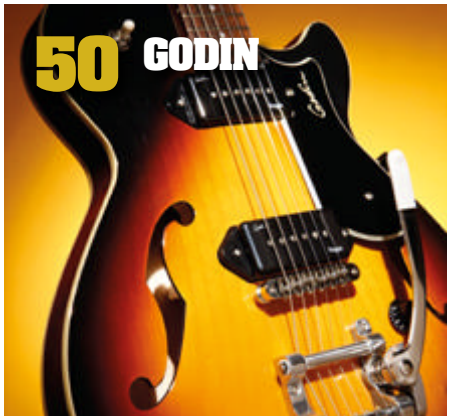
Prog's king of sustain

Photo: Tina K

Regulars

READERS LETTERS 9 NEWS 10 ALBUM REVIEWS 12

Cover photo: Mike Prior



Gear

Cort MBC-1 Matthew Bellamy 46
The Muse man has a new sub-£500 signature that closely echoes his Manson custom builds

Godin Montreal Premiere 50
A classy Canadian semi-hollow with P90s, a Bigsby and clever internal construction

Marshall Class 5 Roulette 54
The 5W pocket plexi is back in a special 'Design Store' limited edition livery

Mesa Boogie MK 5 Twenty-Five 58
A two channel compact amp head with a vast array of tonal options and tweakability

Ibanez PF-15BK & AEW23ZW NT1202 Acoustics 62
A dread and an OM that are easy on the wallet

Spunky Valve Monkey Pedal 69
Two-channel overdrive and compression too

TC Helicon Play Electric pedal 71
Vocal harmony and guitar FX in one box

Nemphasis Effects Pedals 72
The Liquid Mind Chorus, Dark Lady Distortion and VT Comp Optical Compressor

Italia Imola GP Bass 76
A humbucker-equipped semi-solid active bass, based on an Ampeg classic, in full racing trim

Michael Kelly Sojourn Travel Bass 81
A stylish, diminutive acoustic bass that you'll want to take everywhere

Free Blackstar FLY Mini Amp
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SEE PAGE 92

Workshops

Dave Hill's Sam Li Custom 94
Steve Clarke examines the much-modded guitar that provides 'the sound of Slade'

Drills For Thrills 100
More advanced digital manoeuvres

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BEST OF THE CLASSICS

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Please note, we reserve the right to edit where we feel it is appropriate, or to print extracts from longer correspondences

STAR LETTER

A FINE WAY TO PASS THE TIME

Just wanted to prove that you're never too young to start reading the mag (see enclosed photo). Coming back from town I couldn't get a look in!

Ray Faulder *via email*

G&B **And who says the youth aren't interested in guitar playing?! Congratulations, Ray, on some excellent parenting – worthy of a Star Prize and no mistake. You don't mention what part of the mag she liked, which is a shame – publishers all over the land are spending a lot of time and money to get that pre-teen market. We hope that your continued mentoring will lead to full-grown guitar fanaticism in due course. And this obviously proves that we've got egos and love photos of people reading the mag (heck, we're even open to photos of educated animals poring over an issue – although we'd find people using issues as any kind of litter tray too depressing to handle). If anyone's got any photos, please do send them in with all due haste; you can send them to us via Facebook or Twitter, or you can email them directly to the mag.**

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Rosetti

JIMMY, JIMMY...

Much as I love his work, I fear Phil Harris is mixing up his vintage BBC radio comedy shows (*Hooked On Classics*, May 2015 edition). The diminutive (yes, some of us got the joke, Phil) Jimmy Clitheroe had no connection with *Round The Horne* or its predecessor *Beyond Our Ken*, both of which featured Kenneth Williams, Bill Pertwee and the eponymous Kenneth Horne. Jimmy Clitheroe starred in his own '50s/'60s BBC radio shows (*The Clitheroe Kid* being the best known) before moving to TV in the '70s. *The Clitheroe Kid* and *Round The Horne* both aired on the Light Programme at Sunday lunchtimes, which is probably where Phil is getting confused. The BBC Light Programme was of course re-branded Radio 2 in 1967. Yes, I know I should get out more but those guitars aren't going to restring themselves, you know.

Stuart Penney *Perth, Australia*

Jimmy Clitheroe: time we got our vintage comedy right

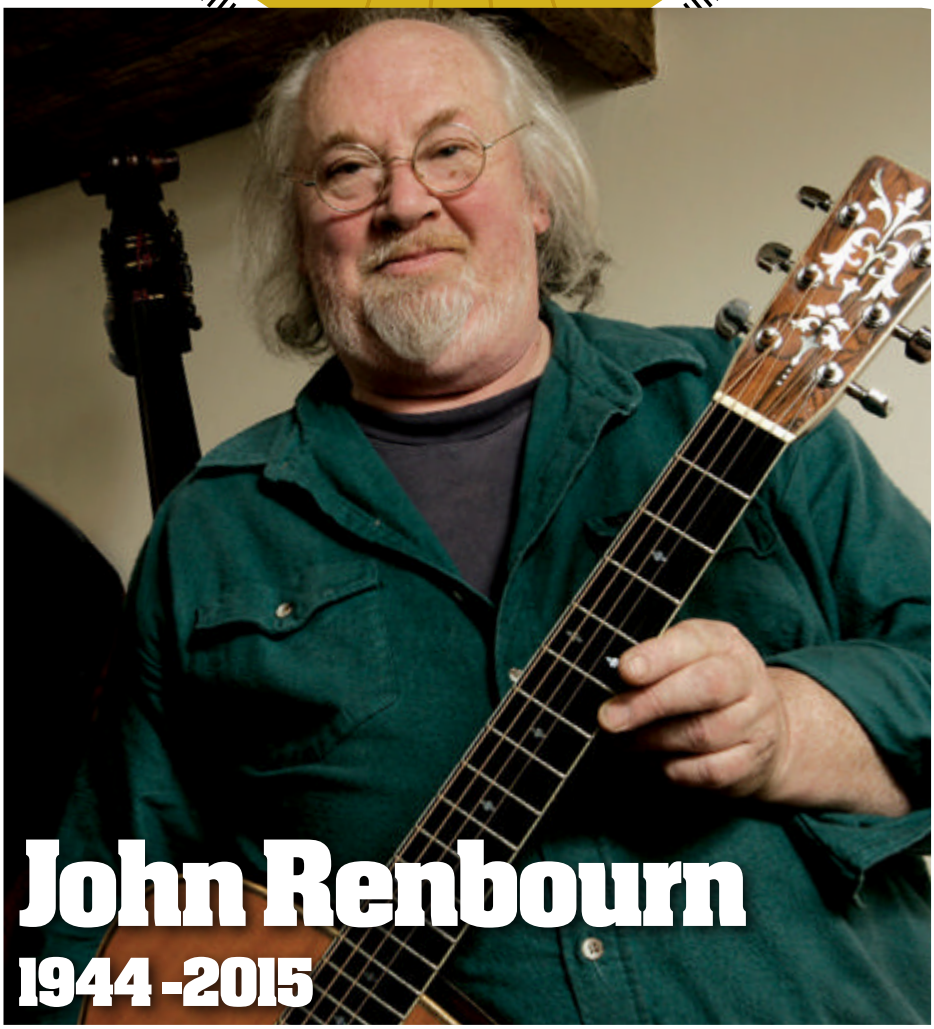
G&B **Many thanks for taking the time, Stuart. Yes, we accept that Phil Harris is a world-renowned guitar expert and pro guitar player of some standing. However, rest assured that we take all errors seriously, and Phil will be in double detention until he can recite every episode of *Educating Archie* word for word.**

EVERYBODY NEEDS GOOD NEIGHBOURS...

Given that often the only time I get to play guitar is late at night when everyone else in the house is asleep, annoying the family and the neighbours has been a constant problem over the years (yes, I do get carried away sometimes). So when some new people moved in next to us, and then I got a knock on the door in the wee small hours a few weeks later, I feared the worst. Luckily, turns out he's a fellow guitar player. We've been honing our SRV licks for the past month and looking to form a band. Doesn't always pay to keep the noise down!

Steve Mair *via email*

Woke up this mornin'... NEWS



John Renbourn
1944 -2015

Jazz, folk, baroque, blues – John Renbourn assimilated them all, and more, to become a truly great musician of his generation

John Renbourn, one of the most influential guitarists of the folk revival of the '60s and beyond, has died at the age of 70. Perhaps best known for his work alongside guitarist Bert Jansch in the progressive jazz/traditional group Pentangle, Renbourn helped forge a path for folk-influenced guitar in popular music and was much admired by players including Jimmy Page, George Harrison, Eric Clapton and Nick Drake.

Renbourn and Jansch were drawn together when they met on the London coffeehouse circuit and even shared a flat, playing guitar all day and performing at night, formulating a unique style that was dubbed 'folk baroque'. Jansch played on Renbourn's self-titled 1965 debut album, and Renbourn returned the favour on Bert's *Jack Orion*.

They formed Pentangle in 1967 with singer Jacqui McShee and a jazz-informed rhythm section of Terry Cox on percussion and Danny Thompson on upright bass. One journalist described the results as 'the missing link between folk, jazz, blues and pop' and the band were venerated as the most sophisticated of the folk revival acts. Their work was certainly a springboard for the folk rock movement, influencing Jethro Tull and Fairport Convention.

Renbourn continued his solo work throughout the Pentangle years, releasing three albums, and after the band split in 1973 he continued with more releases throughout the '70s and '80s, drawing on seemingly incompatible sources such as country, blues, eastern and classical styles. His solo catalogue is an eclectic treasure-trove of stunning fretwork, and even amongst the most elite of the scene's guitarists – Jansch, Davy Graham – Renbourn was always regarded a gifted, innovative and brilliantly technical player.

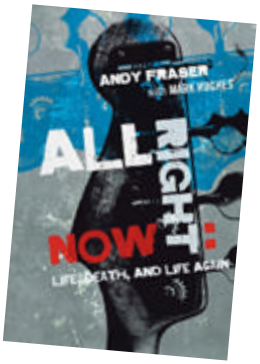
He studied composition and orchestration in the 1980s, earning a degree which led him to teach a course on steel-string guitar, and he authored books of composition and guitar tab. Pentangle reformed briefly in 2007, and Renbourn was still touring with friend fellow guitarist Wizz Jones when he passed away in March. As one of the founding fathers of modern folk, he will be greatly missed.

A Perfect 10 From Vox?

Vox are set to unveil a modern take on the classic AC10 amp which was discontinued back in 1965. The AC10 was one of the first amps to bear the Vox name and has long been sought after by vintage tonehounds for its ability to achieve rich, articulate tone at manageable volumes. The new all-valve AC10C1 features vintage circuitry but with a modern twist and more portability than the AC15. The famous Top Boost tone circuit is in place and the AC10C1 trumps its forefather by adding reverb and a master volume to its armoury. See www.voxamps.co.uk

ANDY FRASER AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Free's esteemed bass player and songwriter Andy Fraser passed away in March leaving an army of grieving admirers. Author Mark Hughes had been working with Fraser on this autobiography for some time, so this is no cashing-in exercise. It's an open, honest and engrossing account from Fraser himself about life as a teenage rocker right through to his fight with AIDS and cancer in recent years. See www.forulicodex.com for more.



The First Orange Effects Pedal In 40 years

The Bax Bangeetar Guitar Pre-EQ is the first Orange pedal to emerge since the mid-'70s. It's an upmarket unit, handmade in the UK custom shop, and it aims to act like an Orange amp, delivering natural breakup and rich vintage overdrive plus a wealth of modern tones with insane amounts of distortion if desired, as well as a clean Boost function with a 5dB kick for solos. Full parametric mid controls allow for complete command over a broad frequency range. See www.orangeamps.com for the full specs.

MARSHALL GETS ITS STRIPES

Marshall has gone for a smart stylistic shift for its brand new Astoria range, with a cool two-tone look and vintage-style plexi name badges capturing a distinct boutique look. These amps have been designed for the sonic connoisseur who craves handwired, point to point, vintage style all-valve tone, but who also requires contemporary features and functionality. To this end the Astorias feature footswitchable channels, gain boost and series FX Loop, with push/pull tonal switching and power reductions. Turrets mounted on a PCB co-exist with handwiring on a single board to make all this possible, while the all-valve heart comprises an ECC83 (12AX7) preamp, GZ34 rectification, and a KT66 output stage. There are three models, all 30W, and are available as a combo or head with a matching 1x12" cab. Speakers are custom-voiced Celestion Creambacks. The Custom, dressed in red, is single channel amp with a footswitchable FX Loop and gain boost plus tone shaping pull switches; the Custom adds an extra channel and comes in blue, while the Classic, in green, is another single-channel model that caters for those who can do without all the mod cons. Available this summer.

Les Paul's 100 Birthday

Had he lived, Les Paul would have been 100 years old on 9 June, and a whole host of events have been organised to help keep his legacy alive. All are in the US, but it's only fitting that 'Les Paul Day' will be celebrated in his original home of Waukesha, Wisconsin and in his adopted home of New York, with Nashville taking part too. To kick off the festivities the likes of Joe Satriani, Neal Schon and Steve Miller will join the Les Paul Trio for a tribute concert at the Hard Rock Café in Times Square, followed by a VIP party at his beloved Iridium club. It will herald the beginning of a 'Pledge To Invent' campaign which will be backed by educational grants, and a national tour of the Les Paul's Big Sound Experience which is a 53-foot interactive state-of-the-art mobile exhibit where people can learn about Les' life. There'll be reissues of his music and much more besides, running right through to May 2016. See www.les-paul.com for details.

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Album reviews

King King
REACHING FOR THE LIGHT
Manhaton Records

Having already cemented their reputation as a top draw on the British blues scene with their debut album, 2011's *Take My Hand*, King King's third release doesn't disappoint,. Listening to how bassist Lindsay Coulson mortally locks in with

drummer Wayne Proctor on tracks such as *Crazy* highlights what a great rhythm section can do, while frontman Alan Nimmo delivers the vocal/guitar goods with ease.

The Word
SOUL FOOD
Vanguard

The Word is essentially the North Mississippi Allstars augmented by pedal steel star Robert Randolph and keys man John Medeski, and the outfit's chiefly vocal-free self-titled debut album of 2001 has become a cult classic. The follow-up

takes their improvised genre-hopping recipe of guitar-led gospel, blues and soul and simmers it down into a funky stew that makes for fiendishly moreish nourishment.

Blur
THE MAGIC WHIP
Parlophone

When guitarist Graham Coxon left the band during the making of 2003's *Think Tank* plenty believed Blur were finished, but after sporadic live reunion performances since 2009 the indie legends have returned with their eighth studio

album – and, thankfully, the record's awash Coxon's idiosyncratic six-string stylings, ranging from fluid loveliness to full-on aural assault.

Tremonti
CAUTERIZE
Fret 12

This second solo release from the Alter Bridge guitarist finds him assisted by Eric Friedman on guitar and Wolfgang Van Halen on bass. Fans of Mark Tremonti won't be surprised to hear that *Cauterize* takes no prisoners, with the likes of

Radical Change featuring some turbo-charged guitar that'll blast the wax out of your ears. Among the other many highlights is the distortion stompfest that is *Another Heart*.

Al Di Meola
ELYSIUM
inakustik

Backed by three keyboard players, drums but no bass, Di Meola tackles exotic eastern scales, jazzy explorations and classical soundscapes with nimble fingerwork and an intrepid spirit. Les Pauls are unleashed but often tempered by nylon-strung

acoustics and the feel is urgent, driving and jazzy but rooted on a bed of classical guitar. It's a challenging, cerebral outing, but with enough melodic marvels to melt any resistance.

John Lodge
10,000 LIGHT YEARS AGO
Esoteric Antenna

Releasing his first solo album since 1977, the Moody Blues stalwart showcases the songwriting talent that has won many an award. A wonderfully evocative meander down memory lane on *Those Days In Birmingham* is enriched by some sublime

lead playing, while the plaintive strains in the intro of *Get Me Out Of Here* skilfully mutate into a tasty rocker. A fine example of guitars being used to serve the narrative of the song.

Sonny Landreth
BOUND BY THE BLUES
Mascot/Provogue

After dabbling with orchestral arrangements and a cast of star-studded guest slots on recent releases, Landreth gets back to basics with a set of mean-edged, rocked-up blues with nods to his beloved zydeco, folk, country and jazz and roots.

Bottleneck mastery is put front and centre on all 10 tracks as he pulls off the trick of getting raw'n'swampy yet still sounding impossibly sophisticated. A highly refined hoedown.

Willie Nelson & Merle Haggard
DJANGO AND JIMMIE
Sony Legacy

Two of the founding fathers of 'outlaw country' croon homages to Django Reinhardt, Jimmie Rogers and Johnny Cash, and salute America's marijuana growers. Covers and self-penned tunes are bolstered with a backwoods groove, some

well-judged Nashville twang and an infectious humour. The pair had a #1 country album with *Pancho & Lefty* back in 1983 and it's clear the chemistry is intact.

David Cross & Robert Fripp
STARLESS STARLIGHT
Noisey

An unusual concept which sees electric violinist Cross taking several versions of Fripp's *Starless Starlight* song, first written for the 1974 King Crimson album *Red*, and improvising a full-length album over loops and samples of the originals.

The guitar is mostly a wash behind the violin, cascading like waves on the shore, but it's a compelling idea and the ambient, symphonic results are well worth attention.

SNAP JUDGEMENTS

Malojian
SOUTHLANDS
twenty30

With echoes of Elliot Smith and Neil Young, Northern Ireland's Steve Scullion's dreamy, melancholy acoustic allure mesmerises with total conviction

Jimmy McIntosh
JIMMY MCINTOSH AND...
CD Baby

John Scofield, Ron Wood and Mike Stern all guest on these arresting jazzy blues instrumentals showcasing the fantastic guitar work of veteran US sideman McIntosh

Giant Sand
HEARTBREAK PASS
New West

Alt.country pioneers Giant Sand mark 30 years of the band with five new tracks devoted to each of their three distinct stylistic eras. It's a wild, offbeat ride

Oz Noy Trio
ASIAN TWISTZ: LIVE IN AISA
Abstract Logix

Noy's intense jazz-rock manoeuvres always proffer sonic fireworks, and this is an explosive set with one the hottest rhythm sections around

Pokey LaFarge
SOMETHING IN THE WATER
Universal

A magpie's horde of pre-war forms such as swing, '20s jazz and more are fused for a prohibition party hosted by a man just turned 30. Intoxicatingly authentic

Striking Matches
NOTHING BUT THE SILENCE
Caroline International

A vibrant, guitar-toting male/female country rock duo whose fine tunes have driven much of US TV's hit soap *Nashville*. Don't hold it against them

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VOLUME
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The Magic OF THE Stratocaster

The Strat's futuristic curves disguised many clever features which were not only efficient to produce but which also vastly enhanced the instrument for musicians. **Huw Price** looks inside a vintage example to see what made it tick

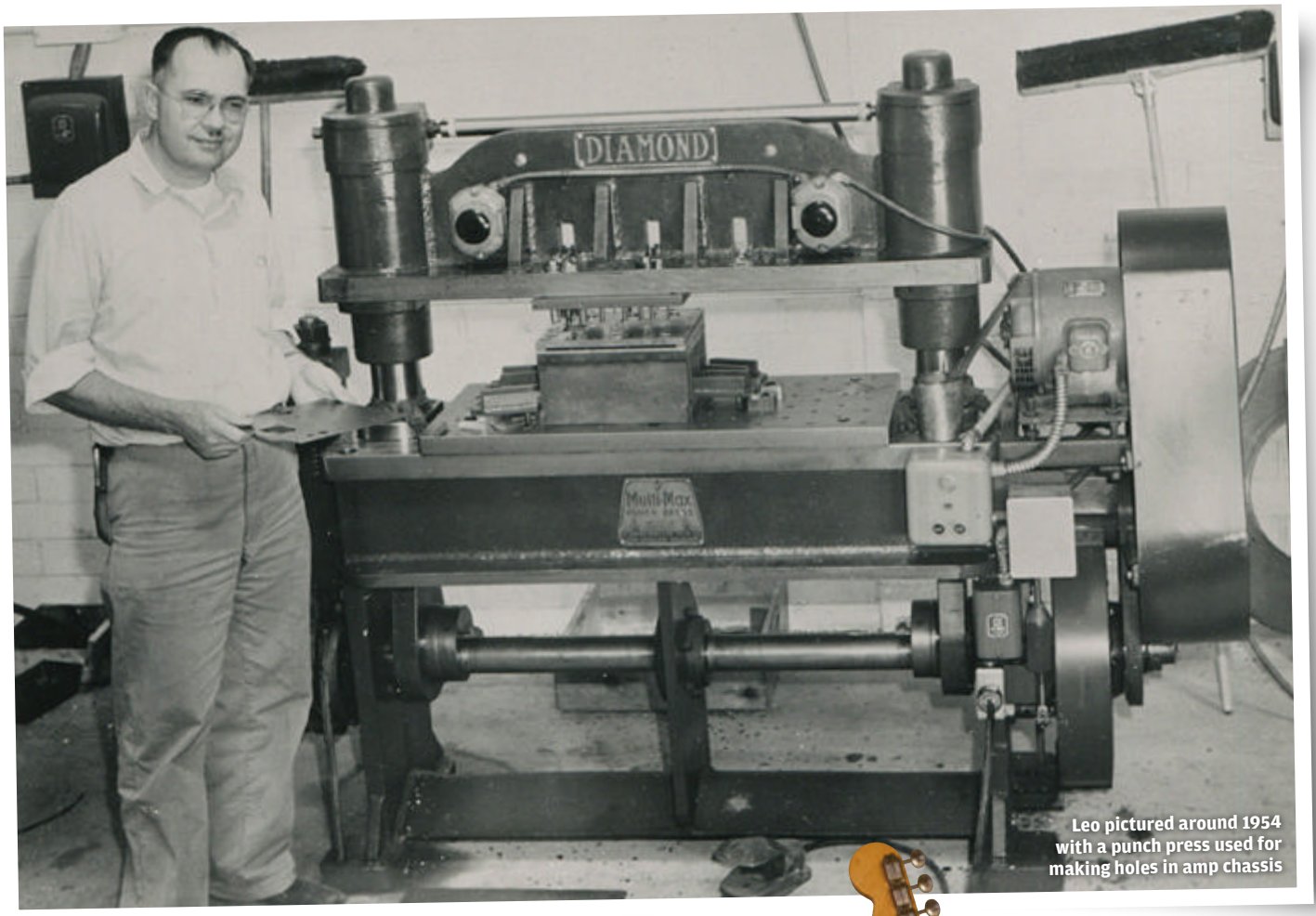
Few 60-year-old objects look as effortlessly modern as a Strat

It's often been said that Leo Fender 'got it right the first time' with the Broadcaster model that we came to know as the Telecaster. Although Fender continued to manufacture that same guitar throughout his career at fender, and beyond to today, Leo clearly felt there was considerable scope for improvement.

So in 1954 Fender dropped the Stratocaster bomb on an unsuspecting public. Although still recognisably a Fender guitar, the design, functionality, hardware and electronics represented a very substantial evolution of the comparatively rudimentary Telecaster. It clearly wasn't in Leo Fender's nature to rest on his laurels, and even more complex models soon appeared.

For some, the basic simplicity of the Telecaster makes it their Fender of choice. Various shoegazers, punk virtuosos and alt.rockers have championed the more complex Jazzmaster and Jaguar, and with the La Cabronita the Fender Musical Instrument Corporation finally came up with a new model that traditionally-minded Fender fans could lust after. Yet the fact remains that the Stratocaster is the most popular, successful and copied electric guitar of all time. It has never been out of production, it has shifted more units than any other guitar – and in anybody's list of top guitarists past and present, the majority are likely to be Strat players.

In this article we'll attempt to identify and evaluate the elements that make the Stratocaster the phenomenon it is and determine whether it really is a work of genius. ↦



Leo pictured around 1954 with a punch press used for making holes in amp chassis

Production concept

It's clear that Leo Fender took more inspiration from the auto giants of Detroit than from Orville Gibson or CF Martin when it came to manufacturing processes. He never set out to make guitars in the 'traditional' way, preferring instead to adopt modern mass product methods using factory workers rather than trained craftspeople.

This approach to manufacturing really took off during WW2. With most of America's working age male population fighting overseas, it was left to women to build the tanks, guns and battleships. Designers figured out how these things could be provided to factories and shipyards in 'kit form' and assembled by workers who hadn't acquired skills and expertise in the traditional way by serving long apprenticeships.

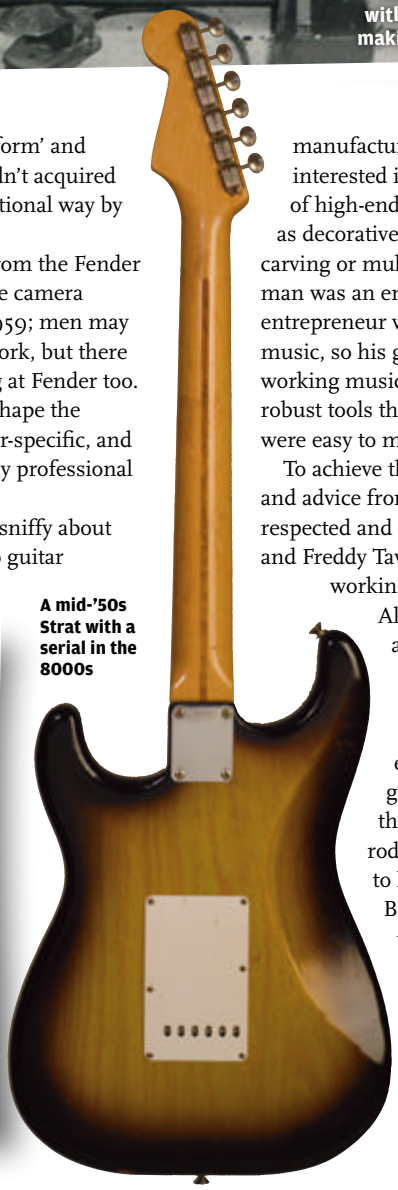
Take a look at early photos from the Fender factory or view some of the cine camera footage Forest White shot in 1959; men may have done most of the heavy work, but there were plenty of women working at Fender too. The methods used to cut and shape the timber were certainly not guitar-specific, and would have been familiar to any professional woodworker or joiner.

Even today some people are sniffy about Fender's 'flat pack' approach to guitar manufacture. Leo wasn't interested in any of the signifiers of high-end guitar building such as decorative pearl inlays, intricate carving or multi-ply binding. The man was an engineer and entrepreneur who happened to like music, so his goal was to provide working musicians with practical and robust tools that sounded good and were easy to maintain and repair.

To achieve this he sought feedback and advice from musicians he respected and some, like Bill Carson and Freddy Tavares, ended up working for the company.

Although Leo didn't always like what he was told, it's to the man's credit that he was open to advice. One example is Fender's grudging acceptance of the necessity for truss rods after it was explained to him that his early Broadcaster necks were unable to cope with extreme variations in temperature and humidity as they were toured all over the USA and Canada.

Early headstock with 'no name' Kluson Deluxe tuners


A mid-'50s Strat with a serial in the 8000s

The Stratocaster didn't simply appear out of nowhere. The vast majority of the features that we now associate with the Strat were adopted in response to repeated requests for extra comfort, a more ergonomic control layout and tonal versatility.

Often, things designed by committee end up being a disastrous hotchpotch of compromises, conflicting ideas and lack of direction. The Stratocaster was revolutionary in many ways – aesthetically, ergonomically, mechanically and sonically.

It's remarkable that Leo Fender managed to bring those ideas together so successfully to create something brutally practical yet beautiful to behold. Conceptually and stylistically the Stratocaster was light years ahead of any other electric guitar of the era, and some would say that it still is.

The body contours gave the Strat a sleek, streamlined, space age look that retains a timeless beauty and grace

Body shape

Two major factors determined the now familiar contoured body shape – balance and comfort. Leo Fender was aware that most gigging musicians wanted a guitar that would balance nicely on a strap without the neck swinging up or diving down. Feedback from players and dealers had indicated that the Telecaster body could be improved upon, and the elongated body horns of the 1951 Fender Precision bass were intended to shift the balance point. Through trial and error Leo Fender adapted the Precision shape for a six-string guitar and Bill Carson recalled going to work one morning to find four or five rough bodies lying on top of barrels that Leo himself had band-sawed.

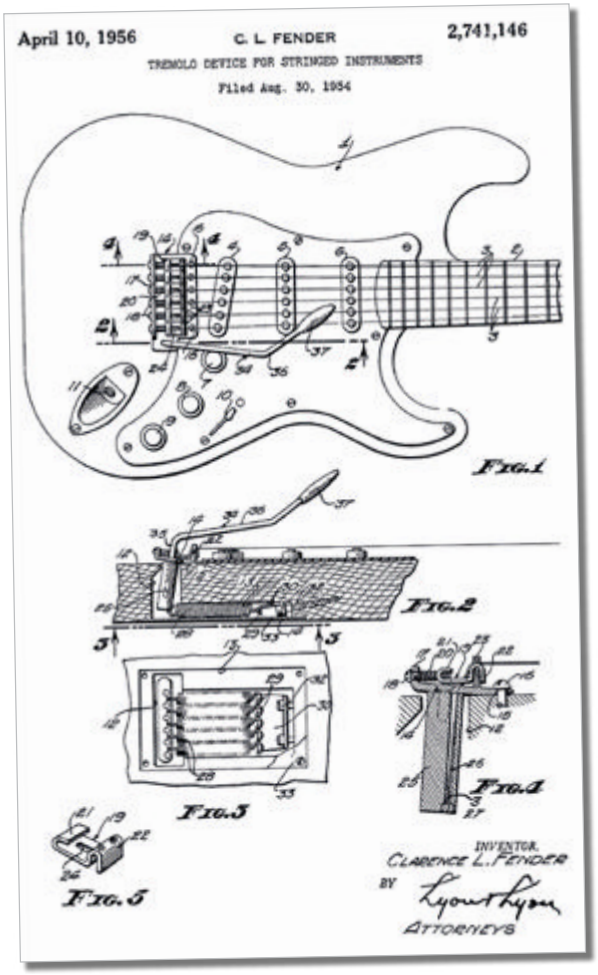
These early bodies shared the same sharp edges as the Telecaster and Precision. As Leo Fender and Freddie Tavares recalled, things changed after a meeting with a guitarist called Rex Galleon. He asked 'why not get away from a body that is always digging into your ribs?' He reasoned that since a solidbody guitar requires no sound chamber, there's no necessity for it to have squared-off edges like an acoustic. Galleon's suggestion was inspired, but it seems likely that various individuals collaborated to arrive at the final shape. The edges were more rounded than the Telecasters and the front contour combined with the 'tummy tuck' or 'rib rout' (depending on how you hang it) made the Strat about as comfortable as a solidbody guitar could be. Crucially, it also gave the Strat a sleek, streamlined, space age look that ↦

retains a timeless beauty and grace. If a more elegant marriage of form and function exists in all of 20th century design, we have yet to see it.

The Synchronized Tremolo

Leo Fender was surely aware of the distinction between tremolo and vibrato, so maybe it was his attempt to differentiate the Stratocaster's most revolutionary new feature from the ubiquitous Bigsby vibrato. Having done that, a few years later he was obliged to call the tremolo effect on Fender amplifiers 'vibrato'.

Some players had been retrofitting their Telecasters with Bigsbys, and the sales department began requesting a Fender guitar with a vibrato unit. By all accounts the development of the Strat's vibrato bridge was a protracted process and it provides clear evidence that Leo Fender didn't always 'get it right the first time'. Leo's first attempt was closer to the design that was later used for the Jazzmaster and Jaguar models, with the strings passing over the saddles to a vibrato unit behind the bridge. Leo obviously understood that reducing friction was crucial to maintaining stable tuning, so he devised saddles with individual rollers.


April 10, 1956 C. L. FENDER 2,741,146
TREMOLO DEVICE FOR STRINGED INSTRUMENTS
Filed Aug. 30, 1954
FIG. 1
FIG. 2
FIG. 3
FIG. 4
FIG. 5
INVENTOR. CLARENCE L. FENDER
BY Lyon & Lyon
ATTORNEYS

The idea was good, but the sound was not – as Bill Carson reported when he road tested the Stratocaster prototype. Apparently vibration in the roller bearings caused a dramatic loss of sustain and made the guitar sound like a banjo. Having spent six months in development and $5000 on tooling, Leo wasn't pleased, but thankfully his perfectionist nature won out as he began re-designing the unit from scratch.

The second version was based on a mechanical gram scale. Like the first version it had springs to counteract the string tension, but the vibrato unit now became an integral part of the bridge, with the strings terminating in a metal block. The basic idea was that the bridge should 'float' above the body and pivot against six retaining screws. The spring tension could be adjusted to alter the feel of the vibrato, and – unlike Bigsby's units – the Strat design enabled the strings to be raised as well as lowered in pitch.

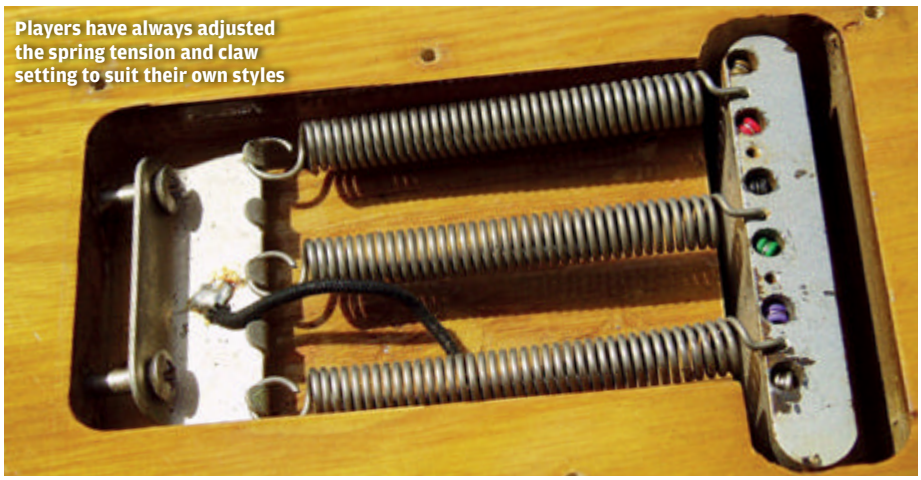
One famous Stratocaster prototype has emerged in recent years, and it provides us with a snapshot of the development process. The body has a narrow spring cavity with just three parallel springs attached to the centre of the bridge block. The spring tree had yet to be devised, and the ends of the springs are hooked over the heads of wood screws that are driven into the back of the body.

Until 1971 the block and bridge plate were separate castings joined together by three screws. Much has been made of the qualities of the original block, and many players retrofit their vibratos with 10oz cold-rolled steel blocks to improve tone and sustain.

In order to minimise friction Leo countersunk the screw holes of the bridge plate to create a 'knife edge' at the pivot points. Fender's headstock design was also advantageous because it provided the strings with a straight run from the bridge to the tuners. Many have pointed out the similarity between the Leo's headstock shape and Paul Bigsby's earlier design, and it's reported that the two men enjoyed a friendly relationship.

The bridge also featured six individual saddles. Leo had been aware that the Telecaster bridge design was less than ideal for accurate intonation, so this was a big step forward that set a new benchmark for all manufacturers. The Melita bridge used by Gretsch pre-dated the Strat and provided intonation adjustment for individual strings, but Fender trumped that with individual height adjustment and a much more palm-friendly surface. Gibson guitars were still equipped with carved rosewood bridges and metal wrap overs until the late 1950s.

Strats came factory-fitted with five springs to counteract the typically heavier strings of the early '50s


Players have always adjusted the spring tension and claw setting to suit their own styles

Leo experimented with pickup coil width, height and impedance and chose staggered polepieces to improve string balance

One of the drawbacks of the Bigsby was that the arm restricted the player's access to controls and switches. In contrast, the Strat's arm is set back from the volume control and when it's not in use it can swing clear of the switch and control knobs. The Fender vibrato has had its detractors over the decades, but a properly-adjusted unit on a well set-up guitar can be a smooth and stable operator.

At first players approached the Strat vibrato much as they would have used a Bigsby. It was more than a decade before Jimi Hendrix began to explore the design's full potential, but nobody has used it with more precision or finesse than Jeff Beck.

The vast majority of later vibrato systems from the likes of Floyd Rose and Kahler took Fender's design as a starting point. By the end of the '80s manufacturers like PRS were moving things away from locking vibratos and were revisiting Leo's original concept with added refinements.

Modern vibrato systems are more likely to move against two pivot points located at either side of the bridge rather than six screws. There is also a far better understanding amongst guitar techs of the tuning stability issues caused by friction at the nut.

Given the parts and materials that were available to him, Leo Fender did a fantastic job on the Stratocaster vibrato. However, he was always aware that improvements could me made, and he continued to refine his design for G&L guitars. Even if there had never been a Strat and Fender had merely fitted his vibrato to the existing Telecaster, it would still have been a pivotal moment in guitar development – pun intended.

Pickups

Leo Fender obviously wanted the Stratocaster to be regarded as an upgrade on the Telecaster, so the decision to equip the Stratocaster with three pickups was a big deal. Fender must have seen an opportunity, because his company was already buying three-position switches for the Telecaster.

Since the beginning Fender's approach to pickup manufacture had been somewhat different. While DeArmond, Bigsby and Gibson were making pickups with bespoke metal components, individually adjustable polepieces and complex plastic mouldings, Fender designed pickups using industry-standard parts and materials.

What could be simpler than six magnetic slugs, two eyelets and flats that could be stamped out of vulcanised fibreboard sheets within seconds? They even used the same fibreboard for amplifier circuit boards and for early Telecaster pickguards.

The Telecaster was equipped with two very different pickup units that created a tonal contrast between the neck and bridge settings. The neck pickup was screwed directly onto the body, whereas the bridge pickup was suspended from the metal bridgeplate. ➔

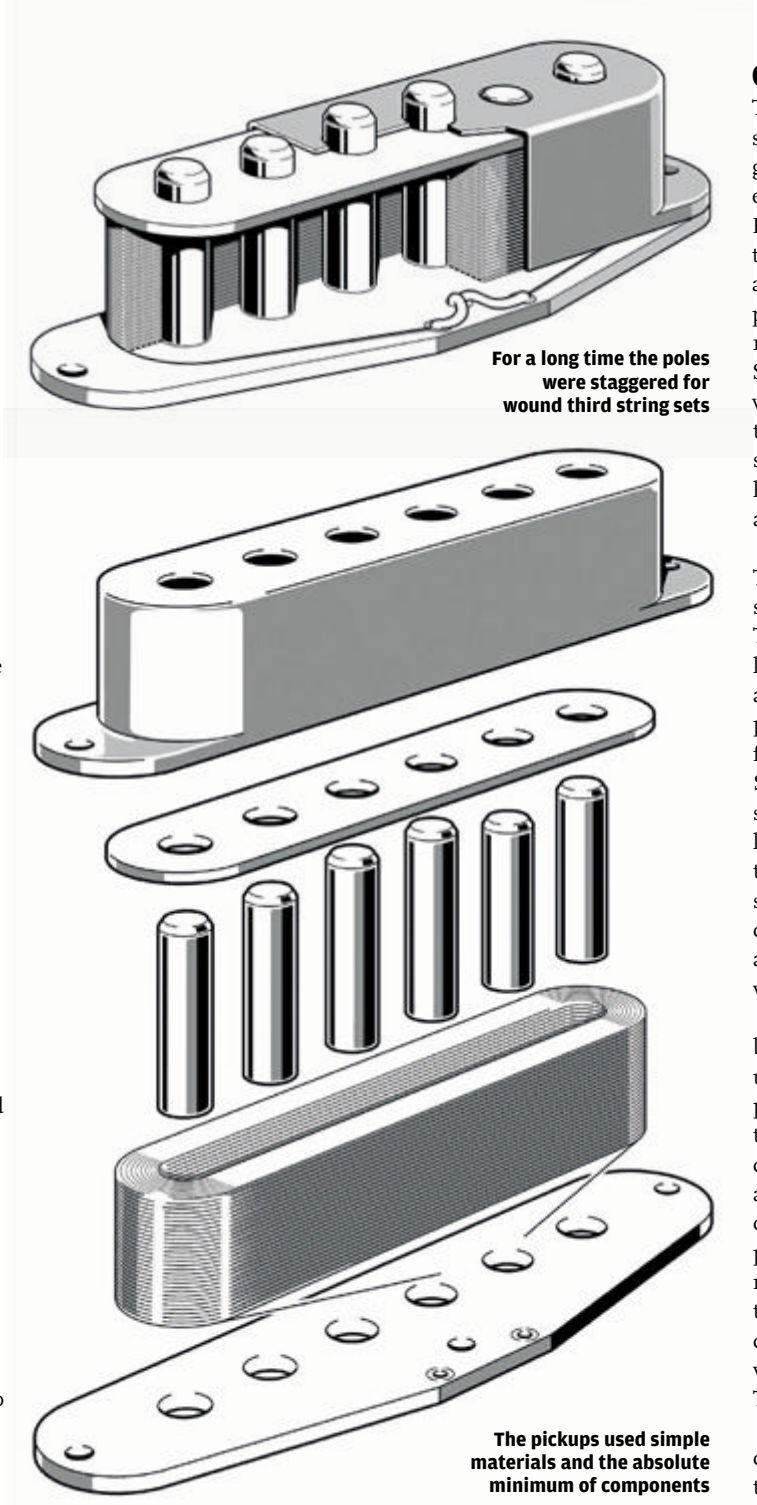
Adjusting the height of the neck pickup required the removal of the pickguard, and all the pickup wires had to be threaded through holes that were drilled through the body in order to reach the controls.

The Stratocaster differed in several ways. Firstly all three pickups were identical, and both the metal inductance plate and metal cover were dispensed with altogether. Since pickups in the neck position tend to sound louder than those at the bridge, Fender made height adjustment simple by suspending the pickups from the scratchplate. With a screw at each end of the pickup, players could balance the volume of the three pickups and fine-tune their treble and bass responses individually. Many of Fender's contemporaries used pickups with little or no adjustment potential and players had to rely on crude shims to balance things up.

The controls were also mounted on the scratchplate, which meant that the pickups and all the controls could be pre-mounted and wired up then dropped onto the body. Only two solder connections were required to install the whole assembly – the positive and negative leads from the volume control to the output jack.

Leo Fender clearly enjoyed designing and developing guitar pickups and he continued doing so throughout his career. Bill Carson recalls how Fender made several types of pickup for him to try out on the Stratocaster prototypes. Interestingly, Leo Fender claimed to have pretty much completed the design for the pickups and the body during 1951, experimenting with coil width and height, impedance and polepiece diameter. The Telecaster pickups had flat polepieces that were flush with the top of the pickup, but in an attempt to improve string-to-string balance Fender changed to staggered polepieces for the new Stratocaster pickups.

It obviously produced the desired results, because by 1955 staggered-pole pickups became standard on the Telecaster too. The slug heights also changed over the years as Fender kept up with player's changing string preferences. The composition of the magnets also changed, but not through design – rather because Fender had to use whatever materials were available at the time.



For a long time the poles were staggered for wound third string sets

The pickups used simple materials and the absolute minimum of components

The magnets were always Alnico, which is an alloy of aluminium, nickel and cobalt, but there was a great demand for cobalt from the defence industry. Consequently, as the cobalt content of the magnets varied, so did the tone of the pickups. Strats from 1954 and 1955 are held to have a more airy, transparent and hi-fi quality and were generally fairly low-wind by today's standards, and it seems that Fender started off using Alnico III.

Opinions differ on the makeup of Alnico III but suffice to say if it does contain any cobalt at all, it's a very low percentage indeed. From 1956 onwards it's generally assumed that Fender shifted over to using Alnico V, and most replica pickup makers follow the same recipe books.

Controls

The 1950s was an era when some guitar manufacturers were getting a bit carried away with electronics. For instance, the Epiphone Zephyr Regent had three pickups, two control knobs and a cumbersome array of six push-button switches, and by 1955 the Gibson ES-5 Switchmaster had individual volume and tone controls for all three pickup plus a four-way switch. In contrast, Leo Fender had an aversion to what he saw as unnecessary features.

One of the criticisms of the Telecaster was that its pickup selector was badly positioned. The switch tip and the volume knob were too close together, and the square-on switch was placed at an inconvenient angle for quick adjustments. For the Stratocaster Leo moved the switch away from the control knobs and re-aligned it to fall in the natural arc of a player's strumming arm. The volume control was also located for easy access and pedal steel-like volume swells.

Teles may be wired for neck/both/bridge these days, but up until late 1967 it was neck with pre-set bass roll-off, neck with tone control, and bridge. Leo clearly liked this arrangement, and having individual tone controls allowed the player to pre-set a treble roll-off on the neck or middle pickup. Leaving the bridge pickup without a tone control gave it a brightness that was closer to the sound of a Telecaster bridge pickup.

Many players liked the combined pickup tone that most two pickup guitars provide in the middle position. Apparently Leo himself preferred the pure tone of individual pickups, which might explain why the original Telecasters and Stratocasters made no provision for this.

From the very start players were re-wiring their Broadcasters and Telecasters to ditch the bassy setting and get both pickups in parallel in the middle position. Naturally Strat players wanted this sound too, and some discovered that they could get combined pickup sounds by carefully positioning the switch between the 'official' settings. Unfortunately this was tricky to do and it was all too easy to knock the switch inadvertently while playing.

In a sense three settings was the only option because, as Fender himself recalled, 'it wasn't a matter of what we would like so ➔

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The control positioning and the switch angle were a vast improvement over the Telecaster

1957 wiring harness with the original paper in wax .1uF tone cap

'It wasn't a matter of what we would like as much as a matter of what we could get to work with' – Leo Fender

much as it was a matter of what we could get to work with'. Five-way switches simply didn't exist, and didn't become standard on Fender Strats until 1978. Had they been available it seems likely that Fender would have used them. In the interim many players opted for alternatives such as Memphis wiring or extra switches – much to Leo's dismay.

Electric bass guitars weren't even on the scene when Fender was devising the original wiring for his guitars. Although the Precision bass had been released in 1951, Fender would have been mindful that many combos of the era would have required a guitarist to cover the bass lines in lieu of a bassist –hence the boomy 'mud settings'.

As the '50s progressed, more bands acquired proper bass players so the 'mud setting' became surplus to requirements and guitarists could keep their tone controls wide open. At the same time amplifiers were getting brighter, so it became apparent that the Strat's bridge pickup was a little too bright. This has prompted many players to reassign the middle tone control or even swap out the bridge pickup for something beefier. Ultimately this would inspire the Superstrat... but that's another story.

Leo released the Stratocaster with what he considered to be the best control layout for the Western Swing and country players who were his main customers at the time, but before long the Strat was being used by blues, rock'n'roll and surf musicians. Although music was changing rapidly, the Strat's wiring arrangement didn't. Maybe it should have, but by that time Leo was several projects down the line. The stock wiring never suited everybody, but the Strat provides almost endless scope for re-wiring, hot rodding and customisation. Far from being a weakness, this has probably helped the Stratocaster to endure and adapt to so many playing styles and musical genres over the last 60 years.

Conclusion

People are often surprised to learn that Leo Fender wasn't a guitar player or a trained instrument maker. But consider this; would he have been such a brilliant guitar designer and innovator if he was?

The man wasn't inhibited by tradition or the conventions of craft. Although he didn't invent them, he was the first to grasp that high quality solidbodied guitars could be mass-produced. Leo also understood the only rule that mattered was putting the frets in the right place, because he approached guitar building from the perspective of an engineer rather than a luthier.

Was the Stratocaster a work of genius? Leo Fender himself probably wouldn't have thought so. He preferred to look forward and rather than re-work old models, applying lessons he had learned from previous projects to the creation of new products. Most likely he would have told you that the guitars he developed for G&L towards the end of his life were better than anything he produced during the 1950s – the Stratocaster included.

Yes, aside from the vibrato, some of the elements that made up the Stratocaster had already been seen in similar forms on earlier guitars. Although Leo's contributions were clearly the most significant, and he certainly assumed the role of project manager, several other individuals contributed crucial ideas. It was a team effort, with the likes of Freddy Tavares, Bill Carson, Don Randall and George Fullerton all contributing.

In essence the key features that made the Stratocaster special are its state of the art vibrato, a body shape that was both beautiful and comfortable, a wide tonal range, a well-considered control layout and the provision of individual string height and intonation adjustment. Perhaps the key to Leo Fender's success was his willingness to talk with players then figure out how to give them exactly what they wanted. With the Stratocaster, he delivered a guitar which ticked almost every box.

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Boom BOYS

If you're looking for firepower then few can compete with a four-guitar line-up, but- as **Michael Heatley** discovers - the Boom Band is far, far from a one-trick blues onslaught...

For an outfit whose debut CD's cover depicts a bullet breaking the sound barrier, the Boom Band do things at a decidedly sedate pace. A soundcheck that began at 3.30pm one recent Friday afternoon was still going four hours later – a rehearsal, effectively, for the album launch show they played at Putney's Half Moon pub that evening. They'd made their live bow at the same venue a year earlier, almost to the day, but had seldom played together since... hence the need for a refresher.

One of those rare gigs was the Carlisle Blues Festival, and another, further south, at the invitation of Radio 2 blues presenter Paul Jones, who booked them as backing band for a charity show in Cranleigh, Surrey. They backed both Jones and Van Morrison, whose verdict – 'This band is great, they're on the money' – suggests they just might be an outfit to watch. But the main reason you will be interested in the Boom Band is not their celebrity connections but the fact they have not one, not two, not three but four lead guitarists and singers in their ranks.

This 'supergroup' – they recoil at the tag, even in jest – was the brainchild of Matt Taylor, frontman of the Motives, who cherrypicked his favourite guitarists with the help of Jeff Beck/Imelda May drummer Steve Rushton. They were killing time at a Swiss music festival, and went about recruiting their 'back of an envelope' dream team once back on home turf.

Steve is no longer involved, but most definitely still part of the action are Jon Amor, Marcus Bonfanti and Mark 'Butch' Butcher – not to mention keyboardist Paddy Milner, who shares vocal duties. There's a real fine blend of voices too, with Bonfanti's deep growl and Butcher's high register bookending the others. It's not surprising the initial 'revolving door' policy coalesced into a fixed line-up which is still evolving and growing musically.

After a whirlwind photo-shoot, it's time to repair to the Half Moon dressing room for a spell of pre-gig interrogation. As the pizzas arrive (Amor favouring his wasabi sushi), discussion reveals the unanimous choice of favourite track as *We Can Work Together*, for its underlying message. In Marcus's words, it 'perfectly sums up a band with four guitar players in it.' A song Matt wrote for the never-issued second Snowy White Blues Project album, it's the one they'll start with tonight – in fact, the first set will be the album in sequence from track 1 through to track 10.

Butcher breaks ranks with an afterthought, citing Jon Amor's *Moonshine* as a personal pick. And that is indeed an understated highlight, the lanky Wiltshireman shouldering Matt's acoustic to deliver a poignant, relatively laid-back ballad that, perhaps regrettably, is his only

Gear

Jon Amor
Epiphone 335, 1992 Fender Strat, Fender amplification

Matt Taylor
1991 Fender Strat, Epiphone J-200 acoustic, Fender amplification

Marcus Bonfanti
1974 Gibson SG, Dean CE resonator, Fender amplification

Mark Butcher
2012 Gibson 335 Dot, Les Paul Studio reissue, Fender amplification

Bonfanti's SG, Amor's Epiphone 335, Taylor's Strat and Butcher's 335 Dot

compositional contribution. It's also, Taylor points out, 'one of our few slow songs or ballads', apart from a certain Blind Faith cover we'll mention later.

Another song to elicit universal approval among the foursome is *Sweet Alberta*, written by founding bassist, Canadian Scott Wiber, as a homage to his home province. Unfortunately his visa ran out so he is now back in (Sweet) Alberta, but the song remains a fixture in the Boom Band set. 'He said he couldn't write songs,' growls a still-disbelieving Taylor, 'and then he came out with that...'

DON'T GIVE UP THE DAY JOBS

It's said Rock Family Trees artist Pete Frame is to come out of retirement to trace the Boom Band's lineage – after all, not many groups can connect Ten Years After (with whom Bonfanti has served as frontman since last year, replacing Joe Gooch), Jeff Beck and the England cricket team.

Jon Amor began his music career with hometown band the Hoax in 1994. He not only still plays with them (they re-formed after a decade's break in 2009) but heads up his own projects. The Jon Amor Blues Group cut two albums before disbanding in 2013, while his current Jon Amor Band consists of drummer Mark Barrett (the Hoax), bassist Dave Doherty (Jon Amor Blues Group) and keyboardist Bennett Holland (King King)

Hard-working Marcus Bonfanti started this year with a wide-ranging solo tour, interrupting it to jet off to the States to play a Rock Legends Cruise with Ten Years After (shipmates ranged from the Doobie Brothers through Alice Cooper to Paul Rodgers). He also plays with the band Jawbone, among whose number is Boom Band keyboardist Paddy Milner.

Formed in 2011, Matt Taylor's four-piece Motives are still very much in business. They played the Royal Albert Hall Bluesfest for the second year running in 2014 and are scheduled to appear at the Maryport Blues Festival in July (hopefully, they won't clash with the Boom Band).

Mark Butcher fronts his own occasional band (including Motives keyboard player Jonny Dyke) and recorded a solo album, 2010's *Songs From The Sun House*, that Matt produced. If he ever needs a backing singer, he can call on spacebound Starship Trooper Sarah Brightman, whom he partnered on the second series of BBC TV's *Just The Two Of Us* in 2007, while still a cricketer; they came third overall.

Most of the band played on most of the album's tracks; the individual solos and vocalists are noted in the CD booklet. Each songwriter had the musical right of veto on each track, but in the event, Taylor reveals, this was never used. If anyone had to bow out of a particular track to avoid overcrowding, the 'leader' tended to do so, but again this was a rarity.

The song with the most space is, by some measure, Bonfanti's *When You Come Home*, which is delivered live with only two guitars, Amor and Butcher shouldering arms and contenting themselves with singing harmony. It would be tempting to assume that a four-guitar line-up might skimp on the vocal front, but each of the quartet is a genuine lead singer.

While all participants are clearly having a ball on stage, passing guitar solos and vocals along the front line, it's former test cricketer Butcher who's the most demonstrative in his pleasure. The man England captain Nasser Hussain described as 'very much a team man' in his sporting days has been playing guitar since age 13. That said, he's probably done most of his playing in hotel rooms worldwide while pondering the prospects for next day's play. He is clearly and understandably pleased to be in such seasoned musical company.

The quartet's main instruments are lined up for their own front-of-stage photoshoot, and all are as different as the men who wield them. Butcher's guitars – both recent vintage Gibsons, a P90-equipped Les Paul and a 335 dot – are unsentimental choices; down-to-earth, non-vintage examples designed to do a job. He used the 335 exclusively on the album, despite favouring the Les Paul for the CD liner photos.

Jon Amor has 'reconnected' with the red 1992 Fender Stratocaster he saved up to buy in Hoax days, though it still alternates with the Epiphone 335 with retro-fitted Bigsby he wielded in the more recent Jon Amor Blues Group era. Changing to the semi-acoustic Epi and using thinner strings 'changed the way I play: I do a lot more fingerpicking and I play a lot more percussively.' Certainly, his contributions are both thoughtful and varied.

Matt's main Strat is a 1991 model he had on long-term loan but 'never felt was properly mine' until a recent formal gifting. He drops to acoustic for certain numbers, and rates his relatively new Epiphone EJ-200 as 'just as good as a Gibson'. A second Strat stands in an understandably full-to-capacity on-stage rack.

While dating from 1974, Marcus' nicely weathered walnut Gibson SG has only been in his possession for a short while; he reveals that his 'one in, one out' policy led to an Ibanez being sacrificed, a smile confirming this was a price worth paying. He doubles on a Dean resonator guitar, set up for bottleneck, with which he professes himself 'extremely satisfied'. Its only drawback seems to be a habit of detaching itself from its strap with unwanted ease. Bonfanti's attempts to reattach said strap in mid-set leads to much joshing

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Listen up

BOOM BAND
Deluxe Edition
(2015)
10 electric and four acoustic tracks from the latest supergroup to hit the blues scene

MARCUS BONFANTI
Shake The Walls
(2013)
The young Londoner's third solo effort from 2013 won plentiful airplay on BBC Radio 2 and 6Music

THE MOTIVES
The Motives
(2012)
The 2012 release by Matt Taylor's 'other' band features two co-writes with Mark Butcher, including standout track *Find Another Love*

And another thing...

The Boom Band's dressing-room treat of choice? Personalised cupcakes... courtesy of a fan!

and a selection of Boy Scout knot-tying jokes. Perhaps understandably, the stage chat to cover such eventualities has yet to be perfected; with an outfit like the Boom Band, there tends to be a lot of guitar-switching between numbers, so it's clearly an area that will repay future attention.

All four guitarists favour Fender amplification – and while Marcus and Matt find Blues DeVilles more than adequate for the task, Jon's rig dwarfs the competition as definitively as his own towering stature. 'If you saw me with the Hoax you'd know why I have this,' he smiles, 'but with the Boom Band it's never been past 2.' Butch, as ever, does his own thing with a Fender Princeton Reverb he's recently re-speakered.

Matt Taylor: 'We wouldn't ask Jeff Beck. He's not up to it!

Marcus Bonfanti and Jon Amor sharing guitar duties

The album was recorded at Taylor's home studio in a week during which his wife and offspring were away on holiday. Many of the songs meander slightly, the predictable result of everyone having to get their solos in, but none outstay their welcome when reproduced live. The track that comes over better on record than on stage is *Monty's Theme*, an instrumental, where all four guitarists take their turn to solo, only to be upstaged by Paddy Milner's final keyboard flourishes. It all becomes a bit of a generic funk-fest live, so maybe you can have too much of a good thing after all...

Marcus's *Diamonds In The Rust* was included on his first solo album, but the 'nu blues' production here is very different to the original. Mark Butcher's songs on the album, notably *Under The Skin*, tend to channel Robert Cray's brand of streamlined blues-funk.

While they have still to promote this current release, all four guitarists agree their next album – if and when it happens – will be written to take advantage of the members' individual abilities. The quartet clearly know much more about each other now, and the process is ongoing. The Boom Band's current itinerary for the year takes in three dates in Holland, plus a return to Cumbria in July to headline the Maryport Blues Festival. There are bound to be availability problems as time goes by, though Matt Taylor emphasises they will pay wherever and whenever invited. 'It's an ongoing thing, and it depends on gigs. If we're offered one we'll ask who can do it.' A system of deps has been established should one of the quartet be unavailable on a specific date, though Taylor smilingly denies Jeff Beck is among those on the substitutes' bench. 'Nah, we wouldn't have him – he's not up to it...'

The Boom Band's website slogan – 'Blues, Southern Rock, Country' – somewhat undersells their appeal. The nearest comparison this writer can come up with is Brinsley Schwarz, the '70s combo that combined the talents of Ian Gomm, Nick Lowe, the eponymous Brinsley and keyboardist Bob Andrews. They were a capable and musically diverse band that deserved more than to be saddled with the pub-rock label.

That said, the Brinsleys got a break when Paul McCartney recognised their talent by selecting them to open for him on Wings' UK tour. Now then, has anyone got Van Morrison's mobile number on them?

COVERS AND STRUMMERS

Having showcased their album with suitable pride, the Boom Band's second set consisted of covers of some old favourites – Little Feat's *Spanish Moon*, the Band's *Look Out Cleveland* and Huey 'Piano' Smith's New Orleans classic *Don't You Just Know It* among them.

It's a risky tactic, revealing your influences – rather like a magician explaining his tricks – but they seem to get away with it. A fascinating choice was Blind Faith's *Can't Find My Way Home*, if only because it was a case of one 'supergroup' nodding to another... but Matt insists that's completely coincidental. 'It's a great song for Butch, and he sings the ass off it. Not many people can sing that song in the original key, Steve Winwood's key, and he's got that range. He's our secret weapon, covering those high harmonies... it's a showcase for him.'

It's also one of four acoustic tracks added to the album as a postscript, not a preamble. 'Our drummer Steve Rushton took his songs when he went,' Taylor reveals, 'and we didn't want to sell people short.' (The CD was promoted through crowdfunding.) The traditional *Nobody's Fault But Mine* showcases Marcus's resonant, bass vocal while the electric opener *We Can Work Together* is the acoustic quartet's closer.

The fourth acoustic track is *You Can Bring Me Flowers* by Ray Lamontagne, of whom Jon Amor, who sings it, is a big fan. The numbers were cut at drummer Alex Reeves' studio, and represent a substantial bonus.

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Photo: Mike Prior

WOLF Tone

Ex-Genesis guitarist Steve Hackett sits down with *G&B* to talk of Jimi Hendrix, vintage Les Pauls, guitar technology, playing techniques and his brave new album, *Wolflight*. Interview by **Steve Bailey**

Ex-Genesis guitar sage Steve Hackett has now devoted two years to delighting hordes of prog-inclined audiences across the globe with an unrelenting tour showcasing his re-imaginings of his old band's best-loved creations. This noble pursuit has also had an unexpected bonus for fans: during occasional gaps in his frenetic schedule, Hackett has crafted a brand new album, *Wolflight*. It's a work that appears to stylistically embrace his current Genesis-invoking mindset whilst staying true to his determination to create music that pushes boundaries and expands minds.

Hackett was recruited by Genesis in 1971 after he placed an ad in *Melody Maker* in an attempt to seek out 'receptive musicians, determined to drive beyond existing stagnant music forms'. That mission statement, it would seem, is as true today as it's ever been. Few would argue that Hackett has proved himself one of the most inventive guitarists in the rock canon, throughout his time with Genesis – he left in the summer of 1977 – and continuing with his extensive catalogue of solo work.

> *'Hendrix had his stacks turned up to stun. Playing through feedback was part of his style'*

His latest enterprise combines echoes of classic Genesis with an ambitious brew of world music and atmospheric soundscapes plus traces of a well-honed pop sensibility. It's a grandiose endeavour, epic, orchestral and dramatic, taking in blues, jazz and ethnic styles but never sailing close to the much-feared prog quagmire that can suck in the self-indulgent. There are violins, cellos, flutes and instruments such as duduks, Arabian ouds and digeridoos, plus a 'tar' sitar/guitar hybrid played by Malik Mansurov from Azerbaijan, who Steve describes as 'Ravi Shanker meets John McLaughlin'.

'There is a lot going on,' Hackett acknowledges with a smile, exercising gross understatement. 'But I wanted to make it sound big and orchestral, so I just thought, well... what defines something as sounding big and orchestral? You can do things like double the basses with brass and have sort of ostinato stabs, so you don't just get that "bomp" on the bass guitar. No matter how big the bass guitar sound is, it won't have that amorphous quality that orchestras have in the low end. I'm thinking of, for instance, Prokofiev's *Romeo And Juliet*, where you've got the basses, the cellos and the trombones all scrubbing away. It's this huge sound. So I went for some of that on this album.'

The whole piece is held together by Hackett's remarkable guitar work, a signature feature of which are the distinctive, elongated notes coaxed from his Fernandes Burny with its Sustainer pickup. It's an innovation that he longed for from the moment he saw Jimi Hendrix play at the Isle Of Wight festival in 1970.

'Hendrix had the stacks behind him, and he had to turn them up to stun in order to get that sound that he wanted,' Hackett remembers. 'He would play through feedback. It became part of his style. Obviously, his legacy is paramount. I'd been waiting for guitar manufacturers to catch up with my dream – to be able to sustain vibrato without the tyranny of volume. I had to wait 20 years for this technology. I see it as essentially an onboard Ebow. It looked as if Steinberger were going to develop that... they were going to call it a full-bow.'

That particular project never materialised, but around 15 years ago sound engineer Richard Butland passed on to Hackett a pink Japanese Fernandes S-type complete with Sustainer. 'It was extraordinary! Basically it's got a three-position switch which gives you the note that you're playing and sustain, then it will give you that note plus a harmonic of that note, or lastly, just the harmonic of the note: in other words, where your note yodels up into high squealing feedback. You get all of that with no volume dependency, you can hold a conversation over the top of it!'

Hackett sought out and bought two of the company's black Les Paul-style Burny models and he had them fit Floyd Rose tremolo systems to both – although he has leant mostly towards finger vibrato in recent times. The manufacturers cottoned on quickly to its new famous fan and offered an endorsement, sending him a goldtop version which has become a go-to guitar and the co-star of *G&B*'s photoshoot.

Gear

Guitars

1957 Gibson Les Paul Goldtop, three Fernandes Burny models with Sustainer pickups, Yairi acoustics (nylon and steel-strung), plus Zemaitis and Farida 12-string acoustics

Amps

Marshall 1987x 50W heads and 1960A cabs for live work

Effects

Controversially, Hackett use no amps to record, just pedals as DI devices. A Sansamp is his mainstay, while a Pete Cornish Iron Boost is another fave. He also uses a DigiTech Whammy, an E-H Micro Pog, an AnalogMan Beano Boost and a Crybaby

Photo: Paul Baldwin

Hackett with one of his first Burny Sustainer guitars: 'I waited 20 years for this technology'

The Fernandes has toggle switches for to control the Sustainer

The classic Genesis line-up reunited for the 2014 documentary *Genesis: Sum Of The Parts* and the *R-Kive* box set

'The goldtop has served me well. It underwent refurbishment some years ago. I had it refretted, which made all the difference to the action. There had been some extra magnets put in the pickups to make them sound more powerful, but a guy called Phil Joiner, who was a guitar tech at the time, said this was erroneous thinking – it was just killing the sustain and pulling the strings closer to the pickups, so we took them out. It improved the tone, and he made the action feel like butter. I've never played a guitar where the action feels as slinky.

'Joiner died in a car crash shortly after he'd done that, which was absolutely tragic as he was just getting his own performing career underway. I will be forever be grateful to him for the work that he did on this Les Paul. It's a wonderful-sounding guitar. It's under lock and key these days – it's kept in Fort Knox, I can tell you! I've had several Les Pauls stolen, always when I was on tour. No matter what size road crew you have, there's always a moment.'

Hackett is also known for intricate classical guitar work, plus his amazing sweep picking and tapping skills (he was tipped by many as an innovator of tapping years before Eddie Van Halen took up the baton). It was hearing remarkable classical guitar skills of Andrés Segovia in the early '70s that turned Hackett from a flatpick man into a fingerpicker.

'Segovia was a huge influence for me, and poles apart from Hendrix because he was vehemently anti-electric guitar. Of course, I had no such prejudice! I listened to a lot of this Segovia stuff and I thought "Hmm, I'm going to have to do more than just use the thumb and the forefinger". But at that time fingerstyle seemed somehow unmanly, like knitting! Real men used a plectrum.

'I've got closer to flamenco playing down the line, and every day I practice rhythmic things with the right hand. I use nails on pretty much everything now.

'I can't take full credit for coming up with tapping because it's the same technique that violinists use, rocking the bow in order to arpeggiate, but just rocking the finger up and down. I think I was trying to achieve maximum mobility with minimum movement... to be able to play fast while appearing to be moving very slowly and economically. Tapping actually sounds better on electric when you play with your pickups set to have more tone and less brightness. It makes those notes easier to pick out. I find that tearing into fast stuff with tons of high-end can work very well live, like a wall of knives coming at you, but I think for recorded work a sweeter tone is better... it's like the fretboard equivalent of good diction. Sweep picking is a similar kind of discipline; it's not hard, you can do it with a plectrum or with your fingers if you've got the nails. Try triplets, which is what I started with. It's just being able to come back on yourself very quickly.'

Watching blues bands in the '60s inspired Hackett to add speed to his playing technique, and many a happy hour was spent in a tiny packed clubs with ears ➔

And Another Thing...

Hackett uses very light-gauge strings – a straight .008" set – due to an accident with a wine glass in 1974 that weakened his left hand. 'I had damage to a tendon and a nerve,' he reveals. 'I had a piece of tendon taken out from elsewhere and sewn in. It means my grip is perhaps not what it should be. I know there are many who say light strings are sacrilege, but I find with the locking system it works perfectly.'

'There's something that the Burny does if you play very lightly with the Sustainer engaged on the B string below the eighth fret, a little bit on the G string as well sometimes; you get the upper harmonic coming through, and that is a gorgeous sound in itself. I often find if I can't quite get enough top I can resort to that. It's a cross between the two octaves, really. I use it without the Sustainer sometimes... it's toppier without. I'm exploring the pickups more than in my early life. I just used to play the treble pickup flat out all the way, but I've come to enjoy what different pickups can do, and the effects are extraordinary.'

'At the time fingerstyle seemed almost unmanly, like knitting! Real men used a plectrum'

The Fernandes isn't Hackett's only goldtop: he's also the proud owner of an original 1957 Les Paul complete with well-preserved gold finish, PAF humbuckers and the traditional 'baseball bat' neck. Bought backstage at a Genesis gig in the US around 1973, the guitar has been his most treasured instrument for over 40 years and you can hear it on much of *Wolflight*, most notably on the blues rock crunch of *Black Thunder* and the ethereal exploration of *Dust And Dreams*.

'A guy came to the show, which I think was in Cleveland, and said "I've got a couple of Les Pauls... are you interested?"' Steve relates. 'I bought this one for $800, but he had a sunburst which sounded wonderful too, sweeter than the goldtop, but he wanted $1200.

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Listen up

STEVE HACKETT
Wolflight (2015)
An album that is as many-faceted as it is accessible, with Hackett mixing rock and classical guitar with styles from around the globe and honing them into an epic masterwork

STEVE HACKETT
Genesis Revisited II (2013)
Reworkings of classic moments across two discs featuring the likes of *Entangled*, *Supper's Ready* and *Dancing With The Moonlit Knight*, with Francis Dunnery standing in for Gabriel

STEVE HACKETT
Voyage Of The Acolyte (1975)
Hackett's solo career began 40 years ago when he was still a member of Genesis. Both Phil Collins and Mike Rutherford chipped in to help

close to bleeding. 'It would come to the point where the guitarist would be playing so fast, it was just a blur of notes. It used to have the same effect on me as being on a rollercoaster. You brain goes "Speed! Good!" and you start to smile.

'But those guys possibly didn't have as much technique as you thought, because when things got up to a certain speed you just couldn't distinguish the notes anymore. In little sweaty blues clubs that was a great thrill, it was tastelessly wonderful, but of course in those days people used to have amps on stage and they weren't being mic'ed up through PAs, so that effect of blurring we've lost to some degree with the modern high-tech, hi-fi aspect of playing live.'

These days Hackett's speediest techniques are often brought into play in the context of his acoustic work, and one of his favourite moves can be heard right at the end of the *Wolflight* track *Earth Shine*. 'I'm arpeggiating upwards with triplets, and then come back with what I call "the scroll". It looks a bit like a galloping horse – thumb, forefinger, middle finger – and I'm sure there's a flamenco name for it. It's a sort of continuous movement that seems impossibly fast.'

These jaw-dropping moves are usually executed on hand-built nylon-strung acoustics by the Japanese company Yairi, the outfit now responsible for Alvarez instruments. 'I bought my first Yairi in '74 to play on *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway* – the last Genesis album to feature Peter Gabriel – and I've had it ever since. I've had various cutaway models with pickups for live work since then. I use a Fishman Aura acoustic modelling device. I can get a high level of volume and it's got different settings on it that work very well with nylon guitar live.'

There's a steel-strung Yairi on the album too, plus a pair of 12-strings – a Farida and an original Zemaitis built to order for Hackett.

'The Zemaitis is a wonderful-sounding guitar, it makes a hell of a noise... deep, rich and bell-like. The marvellous thing about Tony Zemaitis was I think he was still treating it very much like a hobby. He just made them in a shed out the back. He was a craftsman and he did wonderful things. He said he only made one guitar every three months, and I believe that's all he did. He had a book of the ones he'd made which he showed me – Bob Dylan's guitar, George Harrison's guitar, Greg Lake's... and most of them had very ornate bodies, works of art, they looked gorgeous.

'He said "Let me know how you want yours, what colour to you want it to be?" I asked him what would create the best sound and he said just plain, so I took him at his word, so mine is much more basic but it makes a marvellous sound. It is really quite stunning. I put a bridge pickup in it because I wanted to use it live. Sacrilege! It didn't alter the sound one iota, which is a relief.'

Hackett and his prized '57 Goldtop: 'I've never played a guitar where the action feels as slinky'

Photo: Tina Korhonen

'It's too easy to slip into the notion of being the curator in a museum of your own making'

Like the goldtop, the Zemaitis has been with Hackett since he embarked on his solo career exactly 40 years ago in 1975 with *Voyage Of The Acolyte*. He's been on quite a journey since, and has chalked up 26 studio albums to date. He has also rediscovered a love of playing the old Genesis favourites with his two 'Revisited' albums and recent live shows, but he's quick to point out the dangers. 'It's too easy to slip into the notion of being a curator in a museum of your own making,' he warns. 'Part of what I do is writing new music, to try to write in as many genres as I can and to try to put them together.'

If the energy and virtuosity on display on *Wolflight* is a typical example of this new music, surely it'll be many years before Steve Hackett can resign himself to being regarded as a dusty exhibit in the treasured archives of prog. He's a proven innovator, and as long as there are 'rich seas to plunder', as he describes the wealth of styles of music floating around the ether, there are few more skilled at finding fascinating new ways to bring it to us on the strings of a guitar.

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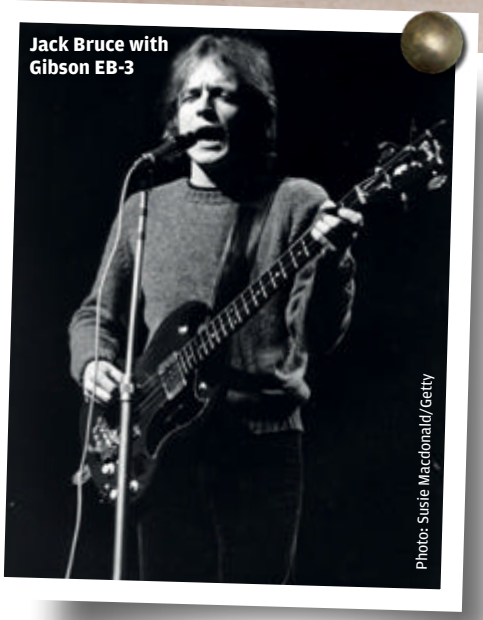
Photo: Lars Mullen, basses courtesy of Paul Dunbar

A black-pickup '63 Epiphone Rivoli, a Gibson EB-2, and a '67 Rivoli

GIBSON BASSES *in the UK*



Jack Bruce with Gibson EB-3

Photo: Susie Macdonald/Getty

In the US in the 1960s, four-stringers built in Kalamazoo were just another also-ran – but on British soil they enjoyed an unexpected burst of popularity. **Michael Heatley** has the tale...

It's no secret Fender basses won the war for low-end supremacy – but the battle in Britain was a different matter. Gibson claimed much four-string loyalty as the '60s unfolded, and this extended well into the next decade. But things started slowly, due to a trade embargo. With money badly needed to pay for reconstruction and help their country adjust to peacetime, Britons were heavily dissuaded from buying import goods, especially luxury items – and bass guitars fell into this category.

US-made Fenders started arriving in the UK around 1960-'61, and the price of a Precision was about £125 – not that much today but, in relation to the wages of the time, prohibitively expensive. Hence the abundance of cheaper European-made instruments with which the '60s pioneers made their music. This is why Paul McCartney played a German-made Hofner (technically a copy of a Gibson) and Bill Wyman a Vox.

Gibsons were 'name' guitars, but were significantly cheaper than Fenders. The biggest bargain of them all was the semi-acoustic Epiphone Rivoli, Gibson's budget version of the EB-2, which retailed at the princely sum of sixty guineas. This equated to £63, exactly half the price of a Precision.

But there was more than mere cost to consider when it came to Gibson basses. By matching their six-string guitars with four-string bass counterparts, Gibson were tempting guitarists to dabble in the 'dark arts', the short (30.5") scale helping to encourage such interest. Many of the European basses used in Britain were also short-scale, so the jump to the Gibson was no stretch in terms of technique for bass players either. (Fender's first short-scale bass, the Mustang, didn't arrive until 1966.)

Gibson's Electric Bass made its debut in 1953

Chas Chandler with his EB-2: it's said that Noel Redding used this very Gibson on *Are You Experienced*

Photo: Ivan Keeman/Getty

Just as the Shadows sold many Fenders in the UK, many beat groups saw a 'matched set' of Gibsons as part of their image

Epiphone and Gibson catalogues from 1960

Just as the Shadows and their matching salmon-pink instruments sold many Fenders in the UK, many beat groups saw a 'matched set' of Gibsons as part of their image. When Mike Pender of the Searchers bought a sunburst Gibson ES-345, Tony Jackson simultaneously upgraded from a Hofner 'Beatle' bass to an Epiphone Rivoli.

When Jackson left in the summer of 1964, his replacement Frank Allen from Cliff Bennett's Rebel Rousers was using his Gibson EB-0 purchased new in 1961, the year the instrument adopted an SG (as opposed to a Les Paul Junior) body shape.

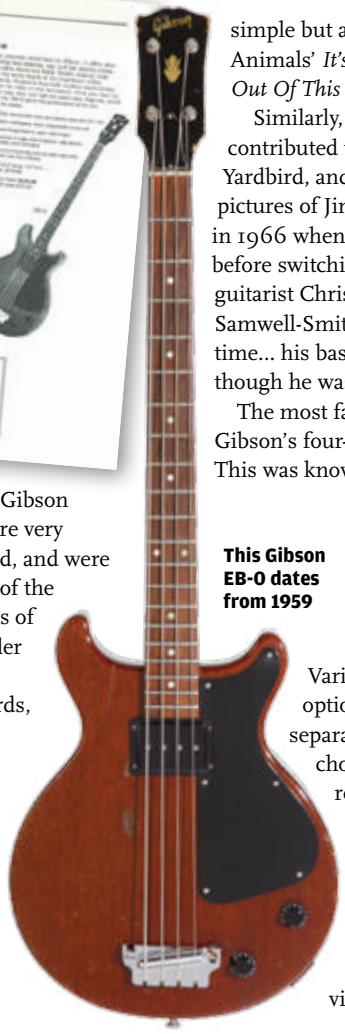
Another of the first Gibson bass users in Britain was Pat Donaldson, best known for the spells he spent in Heads Hands & Feet and Sandy Denny's Fotheringay. Albert Lee, the Heads Hands & Feet guitarist, remembers meeting him outside a cinema on London's Charing Cross Road in March 1961 when both auditioned for the Jury, a multi-racial band that played clubs and US bases; 'He had a Gibson bass, and from that moment we really hit it off.' It seems ownership of a 'name' instrument could be the passport to a lifelong friendship.

The previously mentioned Gibson EB-2 and Epiphone Rivoli were very much peas from the same pod, and were both beat-group staples. Two of the most influential four-stringers of the early 1960s, Chas Chandler of the Animals and Paul Samwell-Smith of the Yardbirds, were Rivoli/EB-2 converts.

Chandler, who went on to manage Slade, was unnecessarily self-effacing about his bass playing, refusing to play in front of Slade's Jimmy Lea, himself a Gibson bass user, because he was embarrassed about his shortcomings. Yet the simple but appropriate lines heard on the Animals' *It's My Life* and *We Gotta Get Out Of This Place* belie Chas's modesty.

Similarly, Paul Samwell-Smith contributed to some great British rock as a Yardbird, and it's interesting to see pictures of Jimmy Page toting Paul's Rivoli in 1966 when he replaced him in the ranks before switching roles later that year with guitarist Chris Dreja. Billy Sheehan rated Samwell-Smith as 'so far ahead of his time... his bass sounded so deep, even though he was all over the place.'

The most famous of the EB series was Gibson's four-string counterpart to the SG. This was known as the EB-0 when equipped with a single pickup and the EB-3 when with two. The latter added a smaller pickup at the bridge to the existing neck humbucker and its so-called Varitone switch offered four options – the two pickups separately, both together, and a choked neck-pickup sound often referred to as 'mud'.



This Gibson EB-0 dates from 1959

The EB-3 was favoured by Andy Fraser and Jack Bruce. It's likely Bruce was turned on to Gibson basses by Cream producer Felix Pappalardi, who played a violin-shaped EB-1 in his

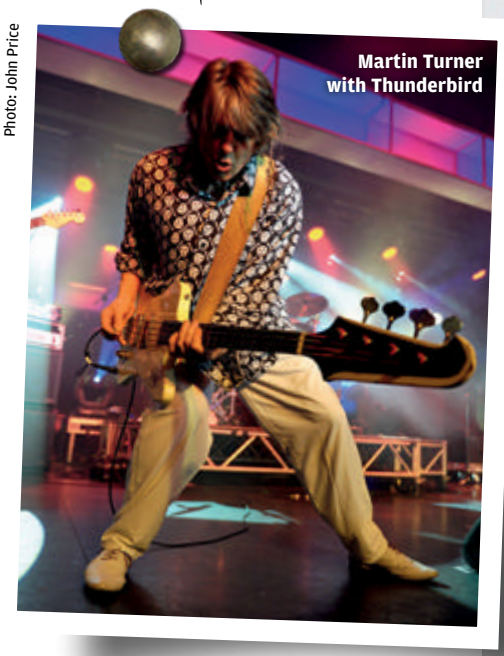


Photo: John Price

Martin Turner with Thunderbird

L-R: a Les Paul Triumph bass, an '80s IV Bass and an RD Artist Bass

Photo: Lars Mullen, basses courtesy of Paul Dunbar

'day job' with Mountain. Bruce switched from a Fender Bass VI to an EB-3 before the recording of *Disraeli Gears* (1967), finding it 'easy to play' and 'more flexible'. Interestingly, the Gibson he favoured when recording his final album *Silver Rails* (2014) was 'my old Gibson EB-1, which is a fantastic old bass from the '50s'.

Fraser's main reason for adopting the EB-3 was his small stature: 'It's small, as am I, so it was a perfect fit.' It was briefly replaced in the latter days of Free by an EB-2 after his iconic bass was stolen, but he remains indelibly associated with the make and certainly ranks alongside Bruce as a role model for rock bassists.

Epiphone Rivoli bass built in '62

The Zombies' Chris White traded his double bass for an EB, perhaps appreciating a woodier tone than Fender offered, while Pete Quaife of the Kinks used an EB-3 from mid-1966 until his departure from the group three years later. His replacement John Dalton also favoured the instrument, which was surprising, as guitarist Dave Davies hated it. 'Pete liked it because he had small fingers, the neck was smaller, and he could play it like a normal guitar,' Dave said. 'Ray and I didn't like the sound of it, though. It was that Jack Bruce sound, which wasn't right for the Kinks' music. The tone was fluffy and all over the place, where a Fender had a more rigid, solid tone.'

Other less celebrated but nevertheless notable EB-0 users included Procol Harum's David Knights, the Merseybeats' Billy Kinsley, and Dave Ambrose of Steampacket and the Brian Auger Trinity.

The bass they favoured was, at 8lbs, significantly lighter than any Fender – an additional selling point, along with the price.

Journeyman Trevor Bolder was catapulted to worldwide renown when he came south at the invitation of Mick Ronson and joined David Bowie's Spiders From Mars. The low rumble of his EB-3 can be heard on a string of classic early-'70s albums, from *Hunky Dory* to *Pin Ups*.

Squeeze bassist John Bentley, who'd played guitar with Bolder in an earlier band in Hull, believes Bolder's unique style was due to the fact he started out playing in a brass band; 'I think he tried to emulate the sound of a tuba when he picked up the electric bass.'

EB-2 bass from '59, the second year of production

Blues fan Bolder idolised Jack Bruce, so naturally gravitated to Gibson. In 2004 the black, slot-headstock EB-3 he played on stage in the 1973 Spiders gig immortalised in DA Pennebaker's film *Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars – The Motion Picture* was put up for auction with a $80,000 reserve.

The Gibson guitar range was known for its exotic styles and pleasing-to-the-eye lines. Finally, this fed through to their four-strings in the shape of the Thunderbird, companion to the Firebird. Introduced in 1963, it was Gibson's first long-scale (34.5") bass, and the first with neck-through construction. It took several years to catch on, bassists being notoriously conservative, but the early '70s offered opportunities aplenty to catch a T-bird in action. Image-conscious British bassists, among them Wishbone Ash's Martin Turner, Pete 'Overend' Watts of Mott the Hoople and UFO's Pete Way, were attracted by its overtly rock image, and the Thunderbird finally took flight. Martin Turner adopted it not ➔

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ARTIST: JOE ROBINSON

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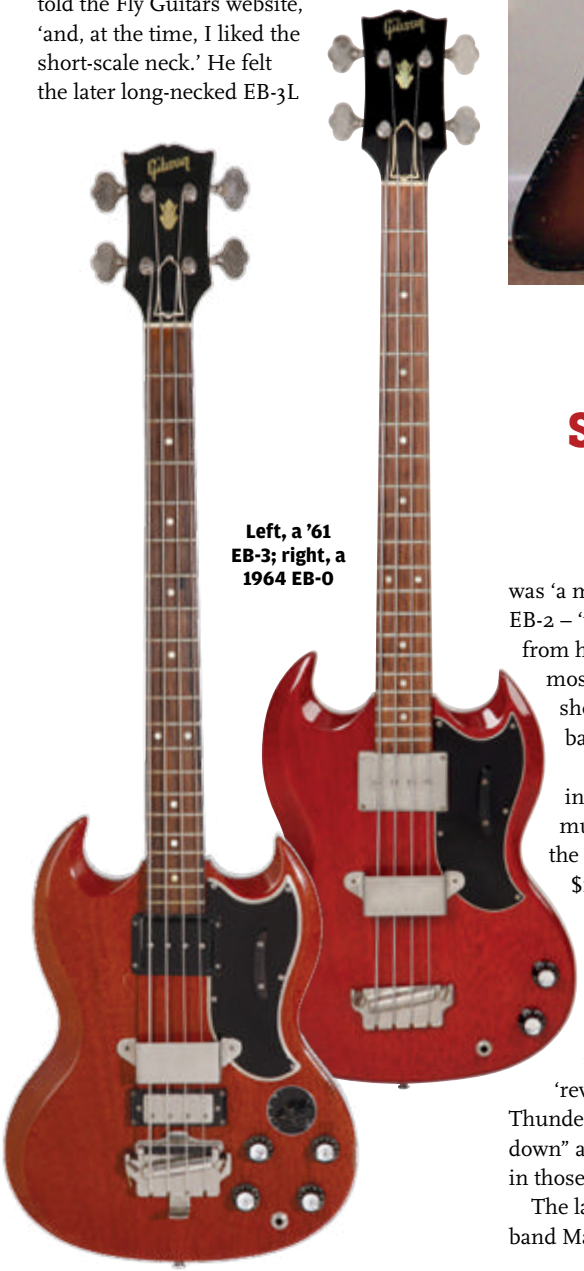
long after the classic *Argus*, purchasing an abused 'bird from Watts when Ash supported Mott. He had it repaired and refinished in white, playing it with a pick ('it has a mushy sound if you play it with your fingers'). As a guitarist by training and inclination, he enjoyed fingering the slim neck, comparing the Thunderbird to a Rickenbacker by claiming 'it's like making love to a woman... not a girl.'

EB-3 and EB-0 catalogue, 1962

Glenn Cornick of Jethro Tull graduated through the Gibson ranks from a 1959 EB-0 through a 1969 EB-3 to an EB-2 and, finally, the Thunderbird, of which he owned two standard and one reverse-bodied example. 'Short-scale Gibsons had a fullness of tone that was very suited to the sound of Tull,' he told the Fly Guitars website, 'and, at the time, I liked the short-scale neck.' He felt the later long-necked EB-3L was 'a major step backward', and exempts the EB-2 – 'the worst instrument I ever owned' – from his praise. The semi-acoustic was used mostly to mime to backing tracks on TV shows – making it, paradoxically, the bass so often associated with him.

A Gibson Thunderbird II, an Epiphone Embassy Deluxe and a reverse Thunderbird II

Photo: Lars Mullen, basses courtesy of Paul Dunbar



Left, a '61 EB-3; right, a 1964 EB-0

The Thunderbird was so unpopular in the States that Manny's in New York had a stack in the basement selling for $100 apiece

The Thunderbird was so unpopular in the States that in 1971, Manny's music shop in New York had a stack in the basement they were selling off for $100 apiece. Cornick bought one while there and ordered another to be sent to England, which he modified with a Guild bass humbucker and a Gibson Vibrola bridge. Glenn, who went on to lead Wild Turkey and who passed away in 2014, recalled that 'reverse and non-reverse Firebirds and Thunderbirds were always known as "upside down" and "right way up Gibsons" in Britain in those days.'

The late Ken Whaley of Welsh progressive band Man bought a metallic blue 'upside down' Thunderbird from Badfinger's Tommy Evans after the bands played on a tour together in 1974. He rated it 'very full and resonant, like piano bass strings... it sounded like a dream, even though one of its two pickups was missing.' (Evans alternated Gibsons and Fenders, but an EB-1 violin bass was a long-time stalwart.)

1967 Selmer prices: 150 and 210 guineas

The Who's John Entwistle did as much as anyone to popularise the Thunderbird, playing it during the early-'70s *Quadrophenia* period. He favoured the two-pickup Thunderbird IV (confusingly, the single-pickup version was the Thunderbird II), and once he settled on the instrument ('because ↦

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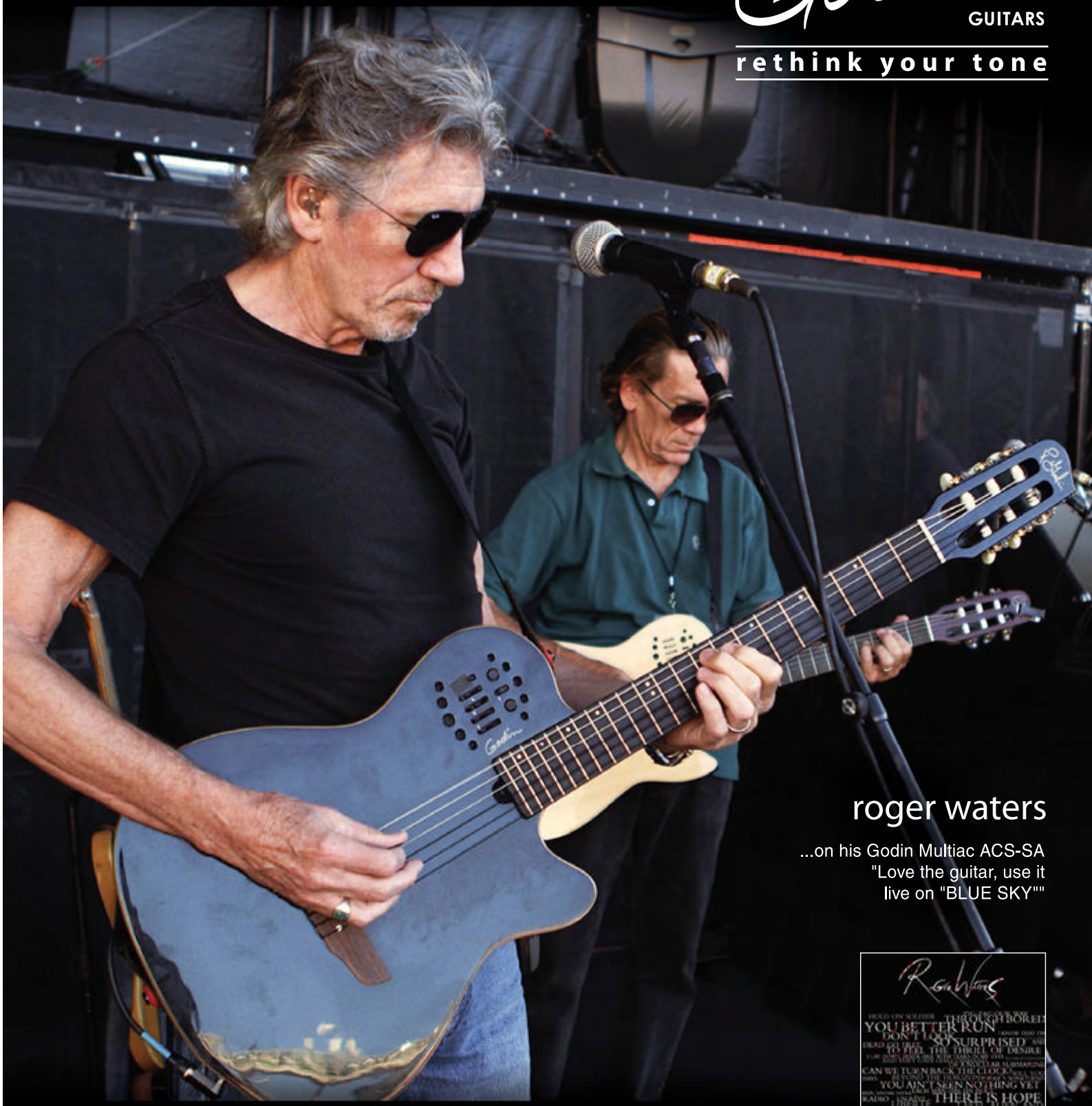

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THE GIBSON BASS'S GREATEST UK HITS

Six of the best from British four-stringers

Sunshine Of Your Love
Cream (1967)
The song Jack Bruce wanted to be remembered for. Is there a more recognisable bass riff in rock?

All Right Now
Free (1970)
It could, should be *Mr Big* – but a hit single with an Andy Fraser bass solo just has to win the day...

The Jean Genie
Bowie (1972)
Trevor Bolder's changes on this aren't perfect but in a way that only adds to the track's bluesy, rough-hewn charm

We Gotta Get Out Of This Place
The Animals (1965)
Chas Chandler's four-string intro sets the tone on this classic 1960s tale of escape and liberation

Over Under Sideways Down
The Yardbirds (1966)
A 1966 freakbeat classic with Paul Samwell-Smith's crazy walking bassline under Jeff Beck's lead

The Real Me
The Who (1973)
The opening track from *Quadrophenia* will still knock your head off, courtesy of the Ox's Gibson Thunderbird

we were playing bigger places and the Fender didn't have enough bottom') bought up the remainder of the stock Glenn Cornick had left in Manny's basement.

From 1975, the Ox also toted the Fenderbird, a hybrid of his own creation that matched the Thunderbird body with a Fender neck. This was because the bottom of the Gibson necks were too thin for him; 'I get my fingers all tangled up,' he claimed. Maple Precision necks were his preferred choice.

Emerson Lake & Palmer's Greg Lake was an early convert to the Ripper, manufactured for a decade from 1973. This retained the four-way Varitone control from the EB-3, but this now governed two specially designed humbucking pickups. 'It has an absolutely precise neck, in perfect tune all the way up to the 22nd fret of the low E string,' said the impressed Lake.

The Grabber, with its gimmicky sliding pickup, was grabbed by honorary Brit Suzi Quatro on its 1974 introduction, but by few others. While Suzi is very much associated with a '50s Precision her father gave her, she had a history with Gibson and used an EB-2 extensively on her first two albums, *Suzi Quatro* (1973) and *Quatro* (1974). She brought a Les Paul Recording, an infamously heavy bass she laughingly claimed 'weighs more than I do', with her from Detroit in 1971, but soon found the strap buttons couldn't take the weight as she leapt around on stage. She then adopted a Ripper for some three years before settling on a lightweight Status.

A late-'70s arrival was the RD Artist, a collaboration between Gibson and Moog that attempted to increase tonal range with built-in expansion and compression circuitry. A simpler version, the RD Standard, was also available, and the Artist found favour with such contrasting bassists as Paul Reynolds of new wavers A Flock of Seagulls and Mick Hawksworth of Alvin Lee's Ten Years Later. The Victory, an '80s rival to the Precision, was briefly touted by John Wetton of Asia, but mostly found little British support. Punk, however, saw the Gibson bass return to minor prominence. When Glen Matlock left the Sex Pistols, he acquired a Gibson EB-0 – not for its sound, but because it fitted into the boot of his sports car. 'It was like a Les Paul Junior, short scale, and it looked great. It was well handy in terms of transportability, but it was really woolly-sounding. It didn't have the kind of bottom you get with a long-scale bass... so it went.'

And that's really been that, unless you count original Oasis bassist 'Guigsy' McGuigan and his Les Paul Triumph. Britain's love affair with the Gibson bass may be cooler than it once was, but Andy Fraser's recent passing has reminded us all that the claim of the EB series to be the 'Electric Bass' was once not as far-fetched as it might now seem. Pour yourself a glass, turn the live version of Free's *Mr Big* up to 11, and just try to keep those fingers still...

For more Gibson bass info visit to www.flyguitars.com/gibson/bass. Many thanks to Mark Francis Tully for the original idea for the feature. Bass lovers should check out the Basses I'd Like To Pluck website: www.facebook.com/biltp

Photo: Mike Prior

Suzi Quatro with Les Paul Recording bass

Gibson's reissues of the Grabber and Ripper basses

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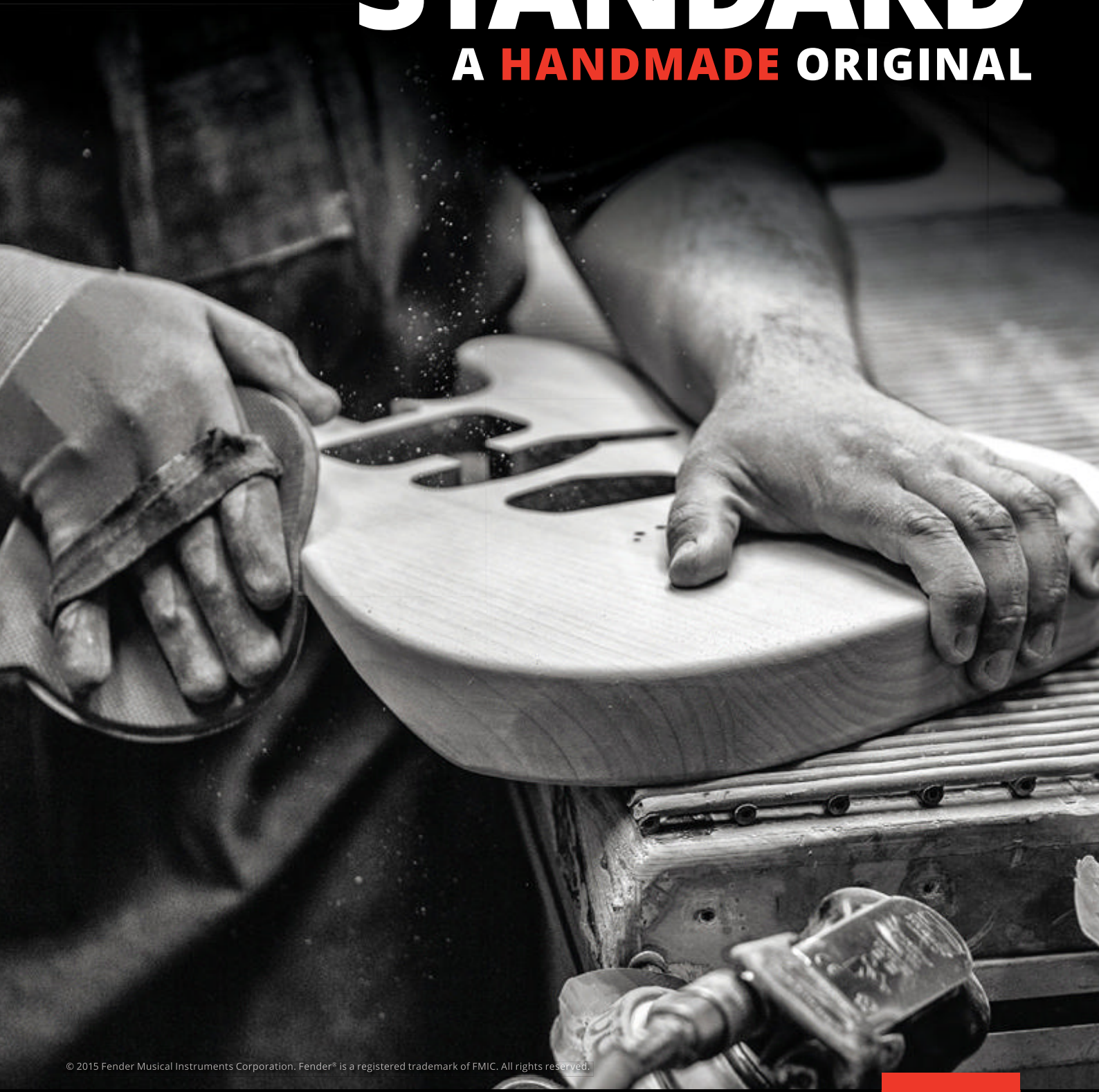

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A HANDMADE ORIGINAL

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Daniel F., product manager guitar

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Manson

CORT
MBC-1 Matthew Bellamy

Killswitch engage! The new, affordable version of the Muse man's long-running Manson signature guitar comes with speediness, power and a 'silence' button built right in. Review by **Richard Purvis**

Muse can be quite widdly, but they're also very melodic, and they rock like giraffes in a hurricane. It's a combination that has made the Devon trio one of those bands that lots of musicians seem to like – and the technical yet accessible fretboard fripperies of frontman Matt Bellamy have made him very much a guitarist's guitarist. There's surely no better candidate for a signature instrument, then – and no better candidate to make it than Manson Guitar Works, an Exeter maker whose association with Bellamy goes back years.

Except that this siggie guitar isn't made by Manson at all. Their numerous 'MB' models may look similar to this distinctive black beast, but all of them cost upwards of three grand. What we have here is a much more affordable alternative: a canny collaboration between a British artist, a British designer and an international manufacturer with access to low-cost Far Eastern production. In a sense it really is a Manson, but made under licence in Indonesia and on sale just below the magic £500 mark. You get the 'Cort' legend (plus Mr Bellamy's autograph) on the front of the headstock, and 'Manson' on the back.

The body shape will be familiar to most by now, whether Muse fans or not: a single-cutaway design with a large and somewhat blobby aspect to the upper bout, like a Les Paul with a badly swollen knee. It'll never be pretty, but you might well consider it cool, and the matt black finish certainly emphasises the bold, slightly sci-fi feel. It's made of basswood, a common budget choice that can sound perfectly fine in the right guitar, and the bolt-on neck is made of highly polished maple topped with a rosewood fretboard.

Maple neck and locking machineheads

Basswood body gives an all-up weight of 7.7lbs

The Manson MB models look similar, but cost upwards of three grand; this one sells below the magic £500 mark

Adding to the MBC-1's modern feel is the neck profile, which is fairly slinky and boasts a reasonably flat-radius fingerboard – a recipe for easy playing that should go down well with fleet-fingered shredders. Oddly, there's a lip of rosewood hanging just a few millimetres over the end of the maple beyond the 22nd fret, though it's been cut away in the middle to allow access to the end of the truss rod; this features a large metal wheel/disc/thingy with round holes around its perimeter for easy adjustment. You get small position markers on the top edge of the neck but none on the front. ➔

FACTFILE
CORT MBC-1 MATTHEW BELLAMY SIGNATURE MODEL

DESCRIPTION
Solidbody electric guitar. Made in Indonesia
PRICE **£499**

BUILD **Basswood body; maple bolt-on neck with 22-fret rosewood fingerboard; tunomatic bridge and stop tailpiece, locking tuners**
ELECTRICS **Manson Design humbucker (bridge) and single-coil (neck), three-way switch, master volume/tone controls, kill button**
LEFT-HANDERS **Not yet, maybe soon**
FINISH **Matt black only**

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 42mm
12th fret 51mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 20.5mm
12th fret 22.5mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 52mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.25mm
12th fret bass 1.75mm
WEIGHT **3.5kg/7.7lbs**

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Epiphone
Lee Malia
Les Paul Custom
Bring Me The Horizon guitarist Malia's signature model also has a humbucker at the bridge and a single-coil at the neck
RRP **£599**

Fret-King
Black Label Esprit V
Quirkily asymmetrical rock axe with twin humbuckers and a tunomatic bridge, available in mean black
RRP **£539**

That natty kill button and an easy-adjustment trussrod wheel

You won't buy it for country cluckin', for sure, but for rock of the metallic, goth or 'alt' kind, this Cort will see you right

The tunomatic bridge and stopbar tailpiece are standard stuff, but the Cort-branded locking tuners at the other end are worth a closer look: the posts are staggered in height, sticking out less and less as you move from low E to high E, thus improving the break angle over the nut without the need for string trees. It's a minor thing, but someone deserves a pat on the back; this is something you wouldn't be able to do with non-locking types because there'd be no room left to wind the strings, and it all seems well engineered.

And so we come to the electrics. The pickups are Manson-designed: a humbucker nestling by the bridge and a single-coil in the neck position. Simple volume and tone controls plus a three-way switch complete the picture...

Staggered height tuner posts do away with a string tree

Meaty bridge humbucker, master volume and tone and a three-way switch

Sounds

With a Fender-style 25.5" scale length, and the MBC-1 certainly has plenty of acoustic zing. Plugging straight into a clean amp, it soon becomes obvious that both pickups have been wound on the hot side: compared to a standard Fender single-coil the neck unit is strikingly loud and full, and it's perfectly matched with the humbucker for volume. Mind you, while switching between the three settings brings no obvious changes in overall level, the humbucker could hardly sound more different – it's as honky as a trawler's foghorn. The middle position does bring some phasey character into the sound, but not masses of it. You won't be buying this guitar for sweet country cluckin', that's for sure.

What you might well be buying it for is, of course, rock – and whether that's of the metallic, the gothic or the 'alt' kind, this Cort will see you right. All that humbucker honk translates into a rich and aggressive high-gain sound, and the neck pickup offers a smoother and more soulful version with no less power. Sustain is good, it scoops out nicely for more contemporary tones if you have an amp or stompbox with the right mids control, and the slickness of the neck – combined with wide, low frets that have been neatly finished all the way up – makes it an easy guitar to get self-indulgent on. Relatively easy access to the highest frets helps with the widdlability, too.

That just leaves the final trick in this black magic box: the kill button. It's positioned right where you'd want it (especially if you're used to doing the aforementioned pickup-switch trick with a Les Paul) and works perfectly; the only thing you have to remember is that these things do tend to go 'pop' in a somewhat unmusical way at low gain settings, but keep it filthy and you'll be fine. Perhaps not everyone will find this feature a genuinely useful asset, but it's low-profile enough not to be off-putting even if you only use it once in your set.

Verdict

The reasoning behind this instrument is sound: Matt Bellamy is a guitar hero, and lots of people want to look and sound like their heroes... especially young people, who, unless their parents own Sussex, don't generally have the kind of budget that allows for a £3000-plus splurge. Teaming up with Cort has allowed Manson to bring its Muse-approved formula to the not-exactly-rolling-in-it-just-yet masses, and here's the important part: the guitar is a well-made piece of kit that's a breeze to play and sounds just as good as it should.

FINAL SCORE

CORT MBC-1 MATTHEW BELLAMY	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Looks	**17**/20
TOTAL	**88%**

Featuring:

- Gibson® USA Mini-Humbuckers
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- Rosewood Fingerboard with "Block & Triangle" Inlays
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- Epiphone LockTone™ Bridge and Frequensator™ Tailpiece
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GODIN
Montreal Premiere

Canadian-built Godin guitars are much loved by pro session players and jazz musicians, which tells you something about the quality, flexibility and sound. **Marcus Leadley** investigates a very traditional new offering

Anyone who dipped into the world of Godin a few years back will have found a range of forward-thinking and original instrument designs – hybrids like the LGX, which offers acoustic as well as electric tones, or the electro-acoustic Multiac series, where you'll find ouds and mandolins as well as nylon- and steel-strung guitars. While the company continues to offer these unique tools, it's also been revisiting some classic concepts, and this new Montreal Premiere is one such beast.

On first inspection the heritage is apparent. The Montreal Premiere is a thinline semi-hollow with a body shape reminiscent of one of the smaller models from Gibson's ES series. With a Bigsby and P90-style pickups, it's essentially a dead ringer for a guitar from midway through the last century.

As always, however, Godin succeeds in finding an individual twist, and this body features a carved spruce 'breath through' core. Gibson's ES-335 and subsequent designs that pay homage all have a solid maple centre block which, by dividing the body chamber in two, cuts down resonance so as to reduce feedback at high stage volumes. If we look inside this Godin, the 'tuning' of the core is quite a work of art – it's very sculptural, with a series of arches that create voids that link the two chambers together. The guitar is less resonant than a fully hollow body but certainly less dry than a fully-blocked instrument. Most semi-acoustics, including top-shelf instruments, are generally made from laminated maple, so it's a surprise to find that this one is made from Canadian wild cherry. Godin's choice of timber for the rest of the instrument further highlights the maker's access to quality woods. The set neck is made from solid mahogany, and the fretboard's a piece of rosewood with a nicely open and visible grain. The combination is very familiar and feels excellent, and the narrow gauge frets are faultlessly installed and dressed.

Mahogany neck and wild cherry back and sides

Individual nickel-plated Kluson-type machineheads

With its Bigsby and P90s, the Montreal Premiere is a dead ringer for a guitar from midway through the last century

The Montreal's hardware celebrates the vintage era: the tuners are Kluson types, while the licensed Bigsby vibrato is paired with a tunomatic-style bridge with roller saddles. While the Bigsby was never designed for significant bends, the set up here allows for a better than average degree of travel, and the guitar doesn't go out of tune.

The control layout is very simple: master tone and volume and a ➔

FACTFILE
GODIN MONTREAL PREMIERE

DESCRIPTION
Semi-acoustic electric guitar. Made in Canada
PRICE **£1399 (with Bigsby - £1299 without). Price includes gig bag**

BUILD **Canadian wild cherry back, sides and top, spruce 'breath through' body core. Mahogany set neck with 22-fret rosewood fingerboard. Tunomatic-style bridge with roller saddles, Bigsby Licensed tremolo**
ELECTRICS **Two Godin Kingpin pickups, master tone and volume plus three-way pickup selector**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Sunburst only with these pickups. Humbucker models available in trans black, trans red and natural.**

SCALE LENGTH
629mm/24.75"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 44.2mm
12th fret 53.2mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 22.2mm
12th fret 25mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35.8mm
Bridge 51.5mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 2.2mm
WEIGHT **3.63kg/8lbs**

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Gibson
Luther Dickinson ES-335
Sunburst thinline with centre block construction, P90 pickups and a Bigsby. Very lovely, very vintage
RRP **£2299**

Licensed Bigsby B7 is much helped by the roller-saddle bridge

The innovative spruce core gives a well-tuned sense of liveliness that makes the guitar musical and easy to control

three-way selector. The Kingpin pickups sit in well-machined body routs and are spring-loaded and height-adjustable.

Sounds

While single coil pickups of this design can be susceptible to hum these do not seem excessively troubled and in the twin-pickup configuration they are wired out of phase so as to be humcancelling. The bridge pickup is clear and bright and while there's a slight hump in the upper mids, it's an open and well-defined sound. It's quite microphonic, in the best possible way, so the pick-edge tone is well articulated and there's plenty of presence.

The twin pickup tone is simply beautiful – clear and precise with a low end that's firm, clear and musical – while the neck pickup delivers a slightly darker, more woody sound, with all the character and richness you'd expect from a good semi-acoustic. Indeed, all the Montreal's clean voices have a natural richness and a lively, twangy character, making it a winner for contemporary jazz, country picking and classic blues. It's also a great sound for accompanying vocals. The tone control works very effectively so varying degrees of roll-off can be applied if you want to move to slightly darker chords, mellow jazz rhythm or extra-smooth jazz lead tones.

Once you start to drive the amp harder, the Montreal really starts to purr. The pickup dynamics are such that you can play gently with exceptional clarity and then apply a little more attack for singing lead distortion or crunchy chords. With an amp running hot the bridge pickup works well for expressive leads and wailing solos; the twin-pickup sound is huge, while the neck unit is fat and gutsy with a thumping bass presence. It's a really good, three-dimensional palate of sounds, and the instrument responds exceptionally well to the subtleties of technique. Winding back the tone control a little brings on some archetypal '60s and '70s rock sounds, and with the right amp the guitar's volume can be used to clean things up nicely. Yes, the guitar will feed back at high levels, but the result is very controllable and addictively exciting.

Verdict

We really rate this guitar. Given the solid wood construction the price is very fair, and on top of that the innovative spruce core makes it a kind of halfway house between a fully-hollow thinline and a less resonant instrument with a centre block. As a result you get a really well-tuned sense of liveliness that makes the guitar musical and easy to control at any volume, while the Kingpin pickups are well-voiced and really help to showcase the instrument's acoustic character. This Godin is pretty much a celebration of what a great guitar can be.

Pickups are the same as on the Godin 5th Avenue

Stylised f-hole adds a touch of individuality

FINAL SCORE

GODIN MONTREAL PREMIERE	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**90%**

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Marshall

MARSHALL
Class 5 Roulette

It's back, but not for long. Marshall's much-missed Class 5 has been re-launched for one last hurrah as a limited edition version with black and red 'Roulette' styling. **Huw Price** takes it for a spin

Maybe Marshall needed to create an opening for the SL-5 Slash Signature, but the original Class 5 generated such enthusiasm that few understood why it was discontinued. There were well-documented teething troubles, true, but once Marshall had introduced a stronger chassis and a more rigid cabinet to cure the rattles, most agreed that the Class 5 delivered on its pocket-plexi promise. Now the Class 5 makes a welcome return – but you'll have to grab one while you can, because this Design Store Special Edition is restricted to just 200 combos, 100 heads and 100 cabs. Marshall is calling this the Roulette Range, and despite being identical electronically to the final production version of the Class 5 combo, the looks are very different.

This combo is rated at 5W and the all-valve signal path features two ECC83 preamp valves and an EL84 working in single-ended mode. The controls include Volume, Treble, Middle and Bass, and inside the open back plywood cabinet there's a proprietary Celestion G10F-15 speaker. The rear of the chassis has a switch for high and low power, plus a headphone socket that gets the power amp signal rather than merely the preamp output, all courtesy of a power-dropping resistor.

The gold plexi control panel is now a moody black

The original Class 5 generated much enthusiasm and most agreed that it delivered on its pocket-plexi promise

Gone are the salt and pepper grille cloth, gold-top knobs, plexi panel and traditional-looking handle. Instead you get a black control panel with red or black speaker cloth and piping along with a more industrial-looking handle.

Sounds

Time for testing, and immediately we were faced with a dilemma – ➔

FACTFILE
MARSHALL CLASS 5 ROULETTE COMBO

DESCRIPTION **5W all -valve combo with Celestion G10F-15 speaker, headphone output and extension speaker output. Made in the UK**
PRICE **£499**

VALVES **2 x ECC83s, 1 EL84**

CONTROLS
Volume, Treble, Middle. Bass, Hi/Lo power switch

DIMENSIONS **495mm wide, 415mm high, 230mm deep**
WEIGHT **12kg/26.5lbs**

CONTACT **Marshall**
01908 375411
www.marshallamps.com

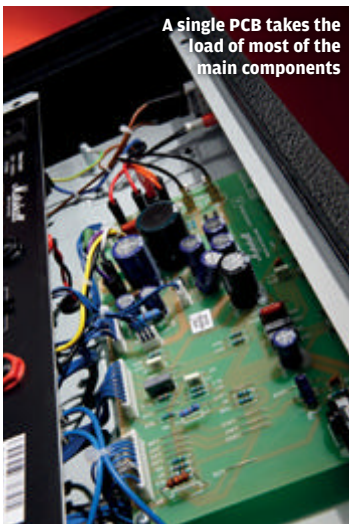
Like this? Try this...

Marshall
Class 5 01
Since the Class 5 01 was only discontinued a couple of years ago there are still a few NOS and ex-demo items out there, so they're still legitimate alternatives to the Roulette. Used prices are holding strong and secondhand examples tend to be in great shape because few owners ever gigged with them
PRICE **£250-£500**

Cornell
Plexi 7
For a few hundred pounds extra you might consider Cornell's take on the theme. Handwired with boutique components, the Plexi 7 is equipped with a Celestion G10 Vintage speaker and a built-in attenuator with three settings
RRP **£865**

Blackstar
HT-5
A two-channel foot-switchable valve combo with Blackstar's ISF control and a 12BH7 dual triode operating in push-pull configuration producing 5W. Also features a stereo speaker emulated output with 4x12/1x12 voicing switch, effects loop with switchable level, stereo MP3/Line input, reverb and a 12" speaker
RRP **£349**

At the rear, a headphone socket plus an extension cab output to allow this little amp to move some proper air


A single PCB takes the load of most of the main components

Purists might find the red grille more perplexing than 'plexi', but the Class 5 offers all the fun of a trad Marshall

whether to start with a Les Paul or a Strat. Ultimately our basest instincts won out and we went with the Les Paul and all the controls maxed out. We weren't disappointed.

Wattage ratings can only give you a rough idea of how loud an amp might be, and let's just say that the Class 5 sounds way louder and bigger than you might expect. The video clips of Joe Bonamassa playing small gigs with his Class 5 are perfectly plausible.

The Les Paul crunches and growls with old school blues and rock tone. Full up is a bit full on, but you should find a decent balance between distortion and definition with the Volume control turned back to about two or three o'clock. There is ample sustain with humbuckers as well as single coils, and we enjoyed plenty of edge of feedback note bloom.

Having sated the rock beast we started exploring the Class 5's range. As you turn up the volume, there's a definite sweet spot almost exactly halfway up when you're playing with humbuckers; with single coils it's just a smidge higher, but this is where the tone fills out and starts to sing with harmonic overtones.

It must be said that the tone controls are not particularly responsive. They certainly do a job but their range and power feels a bit restricted and dialing in a tone is more about broad brush-strokes than fine details. Some interactivity also occurs, particularly between the Treble and Volume controls, when the Class 5 is cranked.

With non-master volume Marshalls, you can dime everything then adjust your sound from the volume on your guitar. Alternatively, you can dial in a clean or slightly overdriven tone then use overdrive pedals, fuzzboxes and boosters for tonal shades.

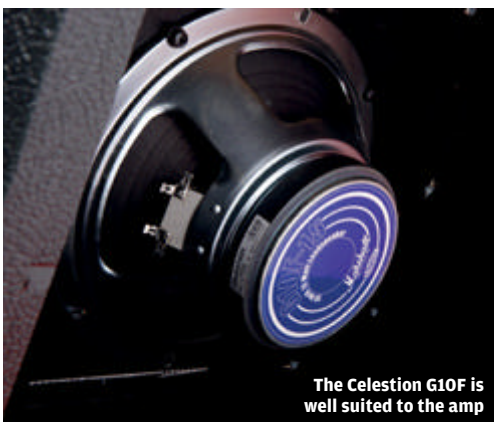
For the former approach you need an amp that retains clarity and responsiveness even when it's getting a lower-level input signal. In this regard the Class 5 provides the necessary thrills, even in low power mode. Next we tried the other method in search that gorgeous Marshall sheen with a fizzy yet delicate overdrive that floats over an otherwise clean tone. The Class 5 performed reasonably well, and we appreciated the way the overdrive and compression characteristics responded to playing touch. The bass can be a bit overblown and the high frequencies could have a touch more airiness but even so, this is a mid-priced amp built with PCBs and industrial grade components, not a boutique pretender.

The G10F, which was specially designed for the Class 5, is well-voiced for the application. The low end holds together well, the treble is open without being too edgy, and the cone distortion complements the valve overdrive. Some owners have swapped out their Class 5 speakers, but having tried this one through both a Celestion Alnico Gold 10" and a G10 Greenback, we can't say that either was an unequivocal upgrade.

Verdict

Is the Marshall Class 5 Roulette still the 'bedroom Bluesbreaker'? We can safely assume it sounds the same as ever, but purists might find the slightly lurid red speaker cloth and the black control panel more perplexing than 'plexi'. Even so, the little Class 5 combo offers all the fun of a traditional Marshall without the risk of putting your back out or receiving a visit from your council's friendly noise abatement officer. Welcome back to the class.

Two ECC83s and a single EL84 output valve


The Celestion G10F is well suited to the amp

FINAL SCORE

MARSHALL CLASS 5 ROULETTE COMBO	
Build Quality	**17**/20
Versatility	**16**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**16**/20
Vibe	**16**/20
TOTAL	**83%**

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Marshall

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TREBLE
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BASS
PRESENCE
MASTER
Boogie

MESA/BOOGIE
Mark 5 Twenty-Five

With 25W of power, six different modes and two channels, this new and surprisingly compact head promises a Greatest Hits selection of fine Boogie noises from the near and distant past. Review by **Richard Purvis**

We try very hard to be clear and consistent when we're describing all this gear, you know – and Mesa/Boogie really isn't helping. The front of this amp only says Boogie, not Mesa; and the 1x12" cab the distributors kindly sent with it only says Mesa, not Boogie. Meanwhile, the front of the amp calls it the Mark 5 Twenty-Five, but the website writes it as Mark Five: 25. Harumph! Well, we get annoyed about these things so you don't have to. Shall we crack on?

One of the very first 'boutique' makers, Mesa/Boogie has been on the frontline of the high-gain American amp industry for over four decades. Like many others, founder Randall Smith started out by tweaking classic Fenders – and when he began adding extra preamp stages to really pile on the gain, the Boogie formula was set. We're not going to list every amplifier they've ever made, but the important ones for the purpose of this review are the Mark series, a lineage going back to the early '70s. The Mark II was perhaps the first-ever channel-switching guitar amp, and the IIC+ version was its final evolution; the Mark IV of the early-'90s had three channels and new levels of control; and the current Mark V, with its 'Extreme' gain setting, is the culmination of the line. Recreations of the overdriven channels on all three are available here at the flick of a toggle switch.

Small but meaty, the Mark 5 Twenty Five head has two EL84s at its core

Recreations of the OD channels of the Boogie Mk IIC+, IV and V amps are all available at the flick of a toggle switch

Now, speaking of switches... get your fingers loosened up, because there are quite a few of them. This is a highly compact, not-quite-lunchbox head but its 12" control panel still manages to cram in enough functions to shame the average nuclear submarine. We'll start at the left – and if you read all the way to the end without stopping, you can have a free lollipop (terms and conditions apply).

It starts simply enough with a single input for your guitar and, below it, one for the included two-way footswitch, which allows you to bypass the five-band EQ section as well as jumping between clean and dirty channels. Then there's a three-way toggle switch for the first channel, offering Clean, Fat or Crunch settings; a manual channel selector; and another three-way toggle for the dirty channel, to specify which of those classic Boogie overdrive voices you want: Mk IIC+, Mk IV or Xtreme. Yes, it's such a squeeze they even had to leave off the first letter.

Next we have two rows of matching knobs, one for each channel: input Gain, a three-way tone stack, Presence and Master volume. The Mid control on ➔

FACTFILE
MARK 5 TWENTY-FIVE

DESCRIPTION **25W all-valve head; 6 x ECC83 and 2 x EL84 valves. Made in USA**
PRICE **£1399**

CONTROL PANEL **Guitar and footswitch inputs; Clean channel Clean/Fat/Crunch switch, Channel switch, Dirty channel MkIIC+/MkIV/Xtreme switch; Gain, Treble, Mid, Bass, Presence and Master for each channel, with Gain boost on Clean Mid control; five-band EQ with On/Off/Footswitch for each channel; 25W/10W switch for each channel; Power and Standby switches**
BACK PANEL **FX loop send and return, headphone out; Reverb level for each channel; 1 x 8ohm and 2 x 4ohm speaker outputs; DI output (XLR, speaker-emulated) with Speaker on/off, Closed/Open back and Earth lift switches**
DIMENSIONS **36cm wide, 21cm high, 22.5cm deep**
WEIGHT **7.5kg/16.5lbs**
ACCESSORIES **Footswitch for channel-switching and EQ bypass, padded cover (both included)**

CONTACT **Westside Distribution**
0844 326 2000
westsidedistribution.com
www.mesaboogie.com

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Soldano
Hot Rod 25
Another all-American 25W head with channel switching, but this one's powered by two 5881 output valves
RRP **£1899**

Rivera
Fandango 55 Top
Using EL34s to take the power up to 55W, this two-channel Rivera head boasts knobbery galore
RRP **£1595**

Mesa/Boogie
Mark V
The pricey big brother of our review amp has three channels and a wall-warping 90W of power
RRP **£2449**

Rear panel: FX loop, closed/open back cab DI emulation, reverb levels... it's comprehensive

the top (clean) channel only works up to halfway, then it turns into an adjustable boost. Then each channel has another little three-position switch for the EQ section: up is On, middle is O (for 'Off' – this time they had to leave off two letters!) and down is FS (which stands for footswitch).

The five EQ sliders cover selected frequencies from 80Hz up to 6.6kHz, all centre-notched for bypass; and finally, each channel can be independently dropped from 25W to 10W by running the output valves in triode mode.

Oh, but hold the lollipops for a minute, because there's also a back panel to explore. Most of the features are familiar enough – valve-driven FX loop, headphone output, speaker-emulated DI – but that emulation can be switched between open and closed back, which is a great touch, and here's an even greater one: there are separate Reverb level controls for each channel. Apart from anything else this tells us that, yes, Mesa has somehow shoehorned an actual reverb tank into this thing. Well, not entirely 'into': it's half in and half hanging through a hole in the bottom.

In use

With Boogies it's all about the cascading gain stages, but we really ought to cover the clean tones first otherwise they'll be forgotten – and they're too good for that. This amp sounds surprisingly large, with a whopping great bottom end and plenty of blackface-style shimmer. The Fat setting works well at filling out lightweight single-coils, and the degree of control offered by all those knobs is something quite special.

Switching to Crunch mode brings on more overdrive than you might expect, even with Gain set low, and this is where bluesy-minded rockers will feel most at home. Moving to 10W operation does not have the same effect as whacking down the volume on a hi-fi; it's still loud, just with less punch and fullness. Happily, the Master control will take you down to bedroom levels without killing all the chime.

Super-tight build keeps the Twenty-Five just 14" inches wide

Fully footswitchable five-band graphic EQ section, set here in the classic V formation

Of course, the real fun is to be had on the second channel. In Mark IIC+ mode the overdrive is rich, throaty and smooth, with an organic quality that any stompbox would struggle to recreate. The midrange bark makes it genuinely Orange-like with the EQ bypassed, but it's much more glassily American using the sliders in a V shape to scoop out the 750Hz zone. Either way, the output valves may be EL84s, but nobody's going to mistake this for an AC15.

Flicking to Mk IV doesn't change the feel of the distortion, but you're instantly thumped somewhere below the ribs by a hefty dose of extra oomph. If you wanted something with more sustain for your foot-on-monitor solo moment, here it is. Xtreme does something similar again but seems to unleash masses of extra overdrive at the same time. This will be a source of joy for really brutal metal players but surely too heavy for just about everyone else, even with both Gain and Master backed off. And don't get carried away: each mode makes the one before sound weedy by comparison when you switch back, but this is misleading.

The reverb sounds fine but seems to hang around for rather a long time, even at subtle settings. It is really handy to be able to set different levels for each channel, though: you might want real spaciness for your clean sound, but are unlikely to want more than a splash of ambience around your high-gain lead work. Finally, home recordists should know that the valves are fan-cooled, which does create a little noise, so if you're mic'ing up a cab you might want to put the amp behind it, not on top.

Verdict

A compact head with two EL84s might not look like pure Boogie but get with it, Grandad, because this is the way amplification is going now. The ultimate flexibility would demand three channels for varying levels of dirt, but if you just want big, spanking cleans and fat, scorching overdrive – with the luxury of total control over gain levels, EQ and reverb for each – then it doesn't get much better than this.

FINAL SCORE

MESA/BOOGIE MARK 5 TWENTY-FIVE	
Build Quality	**19**/20
Versatility	**19**/20
Sound	**19**/20
Value for money	**16**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**90%**

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- Loudspeaker Emulation Switch
- Headphones (3.5mm)
- 300V internal high Voltage tube supply powering 2*12AX7 tubes
- Supplied with power adapter

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Laney

IBANEZ
PF15-BK & AEW23ZW-NT1201

New from Ibanez this year is a fine dreadnought for Johnny Cash lovers who find themselves strapped for, uh, cash, and a handsome-looking cutaway orchestra model in cool stripey zebrawood. Review by **Huw Price**

Lengthily and inevitably rather confusingly named in classic Ibanez fashion, these two guitars – one acoustic, one electro-acoustic – give us a fine idea of what the company has on offer right now on the unplugged front.

PF15-BK

Could this be the ideal acoustic for the would-be Man In Black who doesn't want to go into the red? The PF15 may come from the cheerful and affordable end of the Ibanez guitar line, but as you would expect it's a robust and solidly made instrument.

Peering through the soundhole, two things become apparent: firstly the back and sides are mahogany, and secondly they're laminated. When in doubt you can usually tell if there is no centre strip running top to tail and the sides are without struts or patches. These are used with solid sides to prevent cracks from spreading, but they're unnecessary for laminates. The spruce top is also a laminate, and mahogany is used for the traditionally set neck with rosewood for the fingerboard and bound fretboard. Given the blacker-than-black theme ebony might have been a more suitable choice, but uniformly black ebony is a costly material. Although the natural appearance of the fingerboard has been maintained, it looks as if black dye had been applied to the bridge.

Mahogany neck with sealed chrome tuners

All-black gloss finish with single white back binding

The PF15 isn't very powerful or loud and nor does it have a chesty low-end thump, but it's a crisp, sweet fingerpicker

Decoration is minimal, with white/black/white binding on the front of the body and plain white on the back. The rosette is a simple affair comprising six thin strips of white binding material, and the marker dots are made from a pearl-like material.

The specs also state that the PK15 is fitted with Ibanez Advantage bridge pins. From what we can gather these pins are straight rather than tapered, and allow the ball ends of strings to ride up and pull tightly against a bridge plate for optimum tone.

Switching our attention to the headstock, it's black finished to

FACTFILE
PF15-BK

DESCRIPTION **Dreadnought acoustic. Made in China**
PRICE **£135**

BUILD **Laminated sitka spruce top, laminated mahogany back and sides, 20-fret set mahogany neck, rosewood fingerboard and bridge, compensated saddle, chrome tuners**
ELECTRICS **None**
LEFT-HANDERS **Yes**
FINISH **Gloss black, gloss natural**

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 40mm
12th fret 53.5mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21.5mm
12th fret 22mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 55mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 3mm
WEIGHT **2.3kg/5lbs**

CONTACT **Headstock Distribution Ltd**
0121 508 6666

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Solid spruce/laminated mahogany dreadnought with a satin finish
RRP **£134**

Epiphone
1963 J-45 EB
A gloss black incarnation of a J-45 in all-laminated spruce and mahogany
RRP **£136**

The PF15 is well-built for the money – but the nut lets the side down

Fishman AEQ-SP2 with Vol, Bass, Treble and a tuner

The DI out is a very useful added feature

The AEW has plenty of chime and is woodier with a stronger midrange, but it's fairly one-dimensional

match the neck and body, and a set of decent quality chrome diecast tuners has been installed.

Unfortunately we can't overlook the fact that the nut installation is very poor. The back edge of the nut slot is cut unevenly, which makes the nut appear off-square, although it's not. What's more, no attempt has been made to clean up all the loose material created during the slotting process. It's odd considering that in all other respects the build quality is fairly decent.

Sounds

The PF15 is a pleasant but fairly unremarkable entry-level dreadnought. The medium-depth C profile neck fills the hand nicely and the action on the review guitar was set fairly low for easy playability. There was a bit of fret buzz in some places, but nothing excessive.

The tone is quite bright and breezy with an enjoyable chime and impressive note definition. By dreadnought standards some players may feel that the PF15 is a tad underpowered in the bass end, while others will appreciate the absence of boominess. Either way the PF15 cannot be described as a powerful or especially loud instrument, and you will not experience much chesty thump from the low notes. For some players this may be an advantage because of the even response across the strings. Although the PF15 may not be the most vibrant strummer, it is a quite engaging fingerpicker with a crisp, sweet tone. It does run out of puff a little with dropped tunings but it tunes up smoothly and holds tuning well.

FINAL SCORE

PF15-BK	
Build Quality	**16**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**15**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**16**/20
TOTAL	**82%**

AEW23ZW-NT1201

Pulling this one out of its box, it's immediately apparent that the AEW is a heavier and more substantial instrument than the PF15. The looks are also more dramatic thanks to the 'soft Florentine' cutaway and the vivid grain of the laminated zebrawood back and sides. And if the grain doesn't grab you, it's hard to miss the rosette. Four wide slivers of zebrawood form a ring with joints at all four points of the compass, bordered on the inside and outside edges by abalone inlay and stained maple. More reddish-stained maple and rosewood binds the body, front and back. Even the headstock gets the binding treatment along with a zebrawood peghead overlay.

From the edges of the soundhole it's hard to tell if the top is a two- or three-layer laminate, but it is apparent that the spruce is extremely thin. Some slightly over-enthusiastic sanding has rubbed through to the underlying layer near the point of the cutaway horn, but you have to look hard to spot it.

The mahogany neck is a three-piece construction with a stacked heel and a scarf-jointed headstock. Once again the tuners are no-name diecasts but the black buttons have a rubbery texture that certainly aids grip. They're described as 'ebony', but moulding marks suggest otherwise. Although the logo is pearl, the dot markers look like they could be wood, possibly maple.

Fishman pickup systems are now becoming commonplace on low- to mid-price acoustic guitars, and the AEW is outfitted with a Fishman AEQ-SP2. This appears to be a proprietary unit manufactured for Ibanez and it features a built-in tuner plus Bass, Treble and Volume controls.

The 9v battery resides in a socket mounted under the control panel and the output plate accommodates an XLR socket as well as a regular jack output. The best thing is that both can be used simultaneously, so out in the real world you can use the jack socket to plug into your onstage amp and a front of house sound engineer can connect you straight into a mixing desk without having to use a DI box.

Sounds

The AEW's acoustic tone is more in line with what you might expect from a guitar with its body shape and size, and like the PF15 it has plenty of chime. The midrange is stronger and perhaps a little woodier but a hint of boxy

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FACTFILE
AEW23ZW-NT1201

DESCRIPTION **Orchestra sized cutaway electro-acoustic. Made in China**
PRICE **£315**

BUILD **Laminated sitka spruce top, laminated zebrawood back and sides, 20-fret set mahogany neck, rosewood fingerboard and bridge, compensated saddle, diecast tuners**
ELECTRICS **Fishman AEQ-SP2**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Gloss natural**

SCALE LENGTH
651mm/25.6"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 42mm
12th fret 53mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 19mm
12th fret 19mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 55mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 3mm
WEIGHT **2.4kg/5.28lbs**

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RRP **£399**

Tasty four-piece zebrawood rosette with added abalone

midrange honk also forms a part of the AEW's sonic signature.

There's nothing wrong with the tone as such, besides the fact that it's fairly one-dimensional. That's something the AEW has in common with the vast majority of all-laminate guitars but it does mean that whether you're playing near the neck, over the soundhole or near the bridge, the sound doesn't change that much.

We matched up the volume levels of the jack and XLR outputs to compare. Having expected them to sound identical, the XLR output actually had a slightly fuller and more rounded tone. The differences may be attributable to the different cables that were used, or perhaps varying impedance, but both performed well enough.

The AEW's undersaddle pickup has a tone pleasingly devoid of piezo squawk and the treble has a fairly rounded and sweet quality. Through a flat monitor system we achieved best results with the bass and treble rolled back slightly to tame low-frequency feedback and the hint of brittleness that accompanies most piezo systems to some extent. This resulted in a very playable and enjoyable tone; the D and G strings were just a tad quieter than the others but, even so, the AEW is a decent all round electro-acoustic with good looks and easy-going playability.

Verdict

These two Ibanez guitars present us with a bit of a conundrum. One is stylish and visually striking, yet it sounds fairly generic; the other looks and feels like the sort of Far Eastern-made budget acoustic we might have reviewed 10 or 15 years ago, yet it's priced competitively and it sounds pretty decent. It's a competitive market and the PF15 more than holds its own in its price range. The admittedly handsome AEW is built entirely from laminates, yet it's priced at a point where solid tops are commonplace and solid backs and sides will cost you only a little bit more. Much to ponder.

Sealed tuners come with black ebony-like buttons

The grain does look great, and we like the new-agey cutaway

FINAL SCORE

AEW23ZW-NT1201	
Build Quality	**17**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**15**/20
Value for money	**15**/20
Vibe	**16**/20
TOTAL	**80%**

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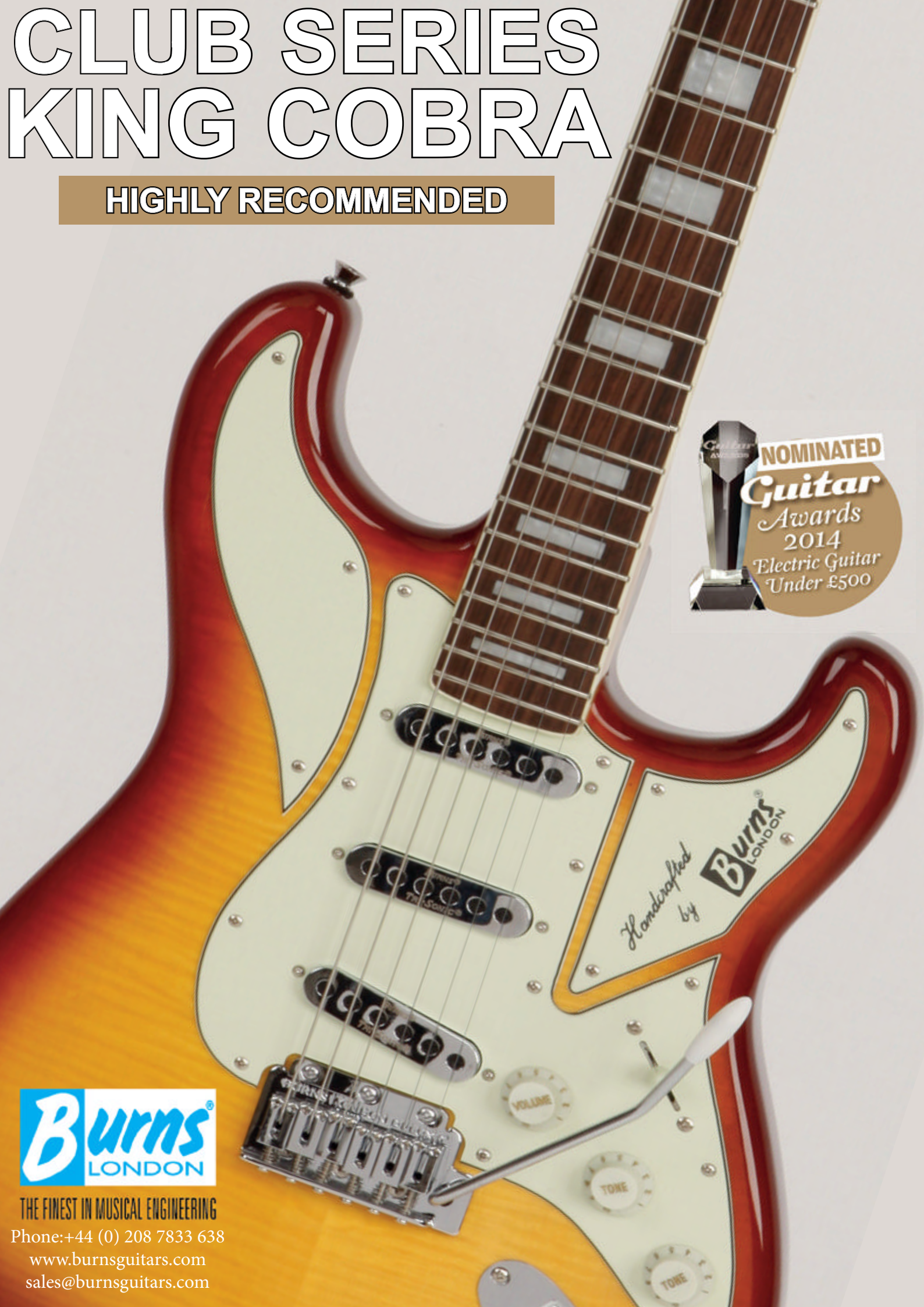

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REES
Spunky Valve Monkey

Light overdrive is an almost obligatory effect to have, and this British three-in-one pedal has two channels, and compression too. Review by **Richard Purvis**

People who build pianos and clarinets don't have to put up with this. Cambridge luthier Clive Rees made an overdrive pedal named the Crunchy Munchy, which his clients loved but insisted on calling the Spunky Monkey instead. So it stuck – and when he came up with a tube-powered follow-up, he really had little choice but to name it the Spunky Valve Monkey. That's 'spunky' as in gutsy and feisty, of course.

The valve in question is a small aerospace type, which is rare enough for Rees not to want to blab about it too much. What he will say is that he chose it because it's tough (the case is metal rather than glass) and designed for low-voltage operation. The pedal works with a standard 9v mains adapter, enough to provide the valve itself with the 18v it needs to cook with.

The printed top panel looks a wee bit home-made but in a charming way, and the aluminium enclosure is sturdy enough. The second footswitch lets you jump between Rhythm and Lead channels, which are basically the same voice but with different levels of gain. You don't get any tone controls but there is a built-in compressor, which is automatically engaged when the pedal is on, unless you turn it to zero.

Sounds

Clive Rees is a fan of classic Celestion speakers, and warns that this Monkey will not be happy going through a scratchy budget cab. After giving it a good spanking with a variety of guitars and amps, we can see his point: this is overdrive of the pure and uncoloured kind, so any harshness in your clean tone will only be exaggerated, not smoothed out.

What this does mean is that, as long as you have a nice sound to begin with, you're unlikely to be disappointed with what the pedal adds to it. We're talking low-gain crunch here – the Rhythm channel hardly adds any grit at all, in fact, and could easily have been called a clean boost, while the Lead channel preserves maximum clarity and dynamics even with Drive on full, and never gets truly fuzzy. You can specify a softer, bluesier voice on this channel at no extra cost.

The compressor is smooth and transparent, although note attack can get thumpy if you push it too far, and of course the combination of overdrive and compression means lots of hiss as soon as you stop playing. Set it to about nine o'clock, though, and it'll give you just a dash of extra sustain and added overall 'bigness'.

Verdict

Maybe some EQ controls would have been nice, and a footswitch for the compressor… but giggable simplicity comes first for Rees, and you can't fault him for that. This is an excellent UK-built stompbox that will add subtle overdrive to a clean amp or give a gentle kick to one that's already breaking up. The only trouble is, it's not particularly spunky and it definitely won't monkey about with your tone, so the name's all wrong. How about Crunchy Munchy?

FINAL SCORE

SPUNKY VALVE MONKEY	
Build Quality	**18**/20
versatility	**16**/20
Sound	**19**/20
Value for money	**17**/20
Vibe	**20**/20
TOTAL	**90%**

FACTFILE

Spunky Valve Monkey

DESCRIPTION **Two-channel valve overdrive pedal with compressor. Made in the UK**
RRP **£198**

CONTROLS **Compressor sustain; Rhythm channel Drive, Volume; Lead channel Drive, Volume; Bypass and Channel footswitches; 9v adapter input**

DIMENSIONS **143mm wide, 88mm deep, 53mm high**

CONTACT
Rees Electric Guitars
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rees-electric-guitars.com

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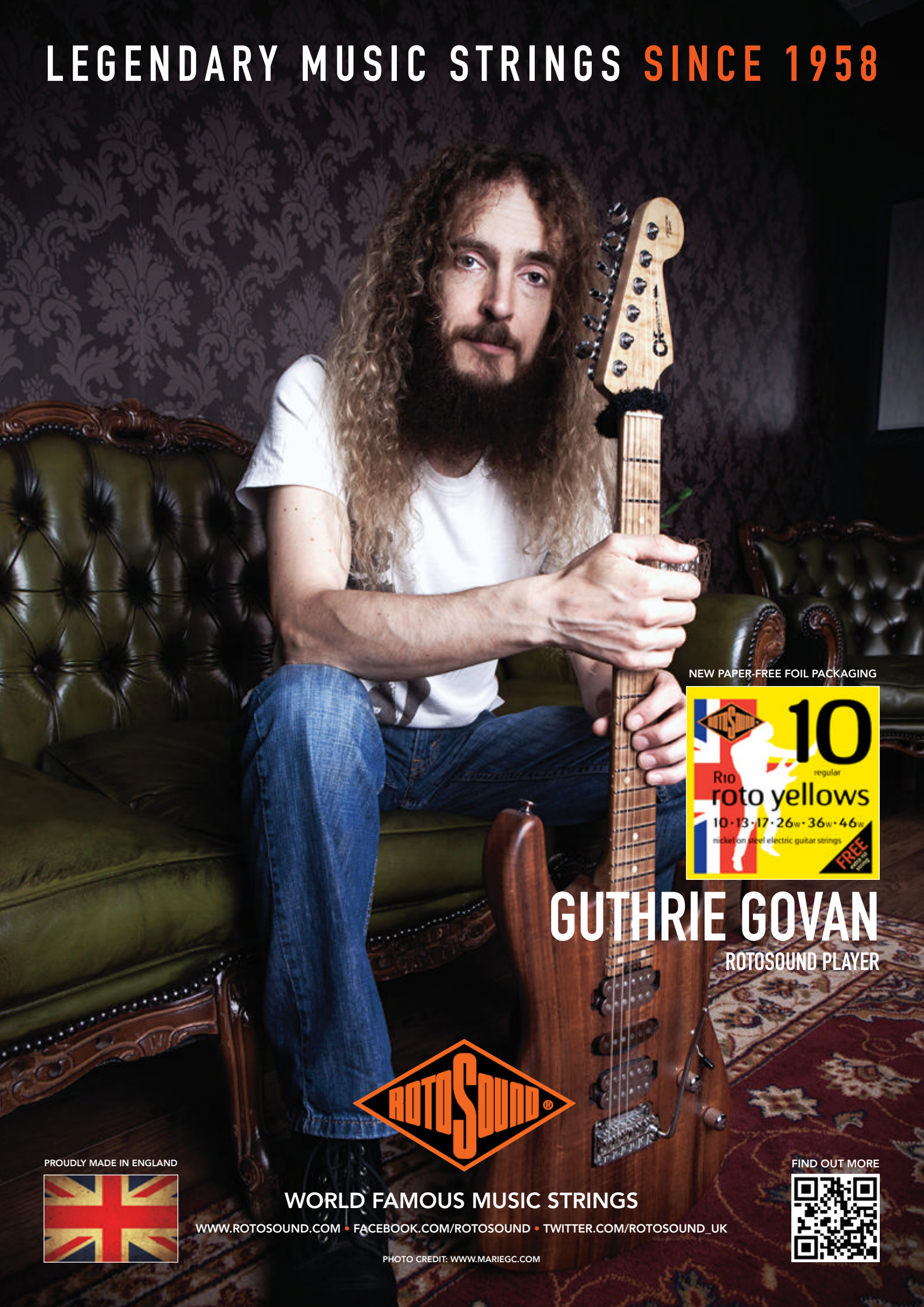

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TC HELICON

Play Electric Guitar & Vocal FX Pedal

Just when you thought you had all the kit you need, here comes a gizmo to make those solo pub gigs sound awesome. Review by **Marcus Leadley**

TC Helicon's Play Electric is principally aimed at solo performers who want to give a guitar/vocal gig a professional sonic makeover, though they're also waving it at the front person in a band full of vocally-challenged associates. The unit offers a range of TC TonePrint FX and the ability to create vocal harmony/doubling effects, and the big news is that the guitar chords you're playing can guide the vocal harmonies it creates.

It has all sorts of connectivity options so you can output everything in mono, send a stereo mix to a PA or recorder, or separate out the guitar. The Play Electric contains amp models, but can incorporate your own amp if you prefer. There's also an Aux input so you can add other devices.

The control panel is nicely laid out. There are Vocal FX and Guitar FX buttons, left and right arrow keys to take you though the effects options, and other buttons to select parameters. The rotary adjusts levels and turns things on and off. There are seven pages of vocal effects: harmony, doubling, delay, reverb, auto tune, transducer effects (think old radio or megaphone) and a modulation page for flangers, phasers and the like. There are five effect pages for guitar – amp models, compressors, chorus, flanging, delay and reverb. The unit comes with 177 guitar/vocal presets that you can edit, or you can make up your own. Other features include a 60 second-looper, a tuner and a pair of mics that can feed your in-ear monitors. This also lets the unit sense the key your band's playing, so you can stop playing and still sing with a harmony backing.

In Use

The Play Electric sounds great as soon as you plug in. You can adjust the guitar level and there's a mic gain control on the left side – very useful for balancing the mix. There are 20 amp models from clean to dirty, and a further five distortion and acoustic settings, and TC's good reputation as a digital FX specialist is well-deserved.

I've never considered myself a singer, but the Play Electric makes me feel I might have a fighting chance – and a good vocalist will sound awesome. The doubling effects thicken up the voice for a sense of presence, and a bit of auto-tune works wonders. Surrounding this with a lush reverb and a well-chosen delay might create a bit of a confection – but hey, at least it's easy on the ear, and it gives you confidence, so even as a practice tool with a pair of headphones it's a real winner. Part of using the unit effectively is knowing when to switch things like the harmony vocals in and out. Used sparingly, it can be quite spooky; you almost want to check there's not someone standing behind you. As for the looper, you really need to add the extra TC Switch-3 with its dedicated looper controls. Without it you can access loop mode by reassigning the bank up and down switches, but this reduces flexibility in other departments. You can't save loops, but you can independently loop the guitar or vocal, so you can play lead over a rhythm loop or layer vocals, and it has an undo/redo function.

Verdict

The Play Live is a lot of fun. There's enough processing to keep most guitarists happy, and the vocal side creates lush, pro-sounding results. For a singer-songwriter or a guitar/vocal duo, it'll deliver a produced sound on any gig – or you can output the separate tracks to your computer, tweak the mix, and that's the album done.

FINAL SCORE

TC HELICON PLAY ELECTRIC	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**90%**

FACTFILE

TC Helicon Play Electric Guitar & Vocal FX Pedal

DESCRIPTION **Guitar and vocal multi-FX unit with built-in tuner and looper. Designed in Canada, made in Thailand**
RRP **£289**

VOCAL EFFECTS **Harmony, doubling, delay, reverb, autotune, transducer effects, modulation**
GUITAR EFFECTS **Amp models, compressors, modulation, delay, reverb**

CONTROLS **Mic Gain, Bank Up/Down, Hit (effect on/off) plus soft buttons for Vocal FX, Guitar FX, Mix, Favourite, Genre (library/access function) Setup. Rotary parameter controller and Left/Right arrow keys**

CONNECTIVITY **Mic In, Guitar In, Out and Thru, Stereo Master Outputs, Aux In, Pedal In, USB, Headphones**

DIMENSIONS **200mm wide, 156mm deep, 45mm high**
WEIGHT **1kg/2.2lbs**

CONTACT **JHS**
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NEMPHASIS
LIQUID MIND
ANALOG CHOR
NEMPHASIS
HAIR
LEGS
Look
Dark
DISTO
NEMPHASIS

NEMPHASIS

Liquid Mind Chorus, Dark Lady Distortion & VT Comp Optical Compressor

While Italy isn't the most prolific of nations when it comes to manufacturing contemporary music technology, Nemphasis is doing its best to change that. **Marcus Leadley** checks out some promising pedals...

Nemphasis makes a healthy range of guitar and bass effects, from overdrives and distortions to compressors and chorusses. We're taking a close look at one pedal from each of those categories to find out what this Italian company is up to...

Liquid Mind Chorus

Everyone – well, nearly everyone – needs a good chorus pedal. It's one of the classic modulation effects that, at the more extreme ends of things, can add the kind of evil '80 indie quality so beloved of bands like the Cure or the Psychedelic Furs, or you can use it with less abandon to add subtle tonal movements or shimmering pseudo 12-string effects... and what could be better for your pedalboard than a nice chunky pedal in a classic '70s bright orange reminiscent of a vintage MXR? Everything about the look of this pedal says it means business: no fancy graphics, easy-to-read control legends, and three knobs labelled Depth, Speed and Colour. You can use a power adapter, or else you must unscrew the bass plate (ah, more retro charm) to insert a 9V battery. This isn't a handwired boutique item, but at the same time it's most clearly not a budget unit. The circuit board is well laid out, a lot of attention to detail has gone into the design and layout – and it's refreshing to see a pedal manufactured somewhere other than China.

Sounds

This pedal is capable of both incredibly subtle shades and squiffy warblings, and the great thing is that you can go from one extreme to another via endless degrees. All the controls are highly interactive and you really get the sense of being in control. Colour is essentially a tone control that, at its most advanced, applies a mild boost to the overall signal. The zero point is pretty much aligned with your basic guitar tone so the unit isn't designed to deliver a darker character; in fact, with Depth and Speed set to minimum you could effectively use the Liquid

FINAL SCORE

LIQUID MIND CHORUS	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**17**/20
Value for money	**17**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**87%**

FACTFILE

LIQUID MIND CHORUS

DESCRIPTION **Analogue chorus pedal. Custom aluminium enclosure, true bypass switching. Manufactured in Italy. 9V battery or power adapter (not supplied)**
PRICE **£149**
CONTROLS **Depth, Speed, Colour**

DARK LADY 'RED KNOBS' DISTORTION

DESCRIPTION **Distortion pedal with switchable silicon/germanium transistors. Custom aluminium enclosure, true bypass switching. Built in Italy 9V battery or power adapter (not supplied)**
PRICE **£149**
CONTROLS **Look Hair, Legs, Voice (mini-toggle)**

VT COMP OPTICAL COMPRESSOR

DESCRIPTION **Optical compressor pedal. Custom aluminium enclosure, true bypass switching. Built in Italy 9V battery or power adapter (not supplied)**
PRICE **£149**
CONTROLS **Compress, Attack, Level**

CONTACT **Madison And Fifth +44 (0)1858 446782 www.nemphasis.com/en/**

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All three pedals come with Davies knobs and with power inputs on the right hand side

Mind as a treble booster. Gradually bringing up the Depth while keeping the Speed low gives you some subtle, shifting tone-shaping colour that's hard to pin down, transforming into a kind of sitar-like richness past about 12 o'clock on the dial. Pulling back on the Depth while gently increasing the Speed initially gives you something very close to a tremolo, which gradually opens up towards a classic vintage chorus sound. From here, manipulating the Speed control to suit the speed or cycle of the track your working on yields very impressive-sounding results which can be nuanced as subtly as you like.

Dark Lady 'Red Knobs' Distortion

This 'red knob' pedal is billed as a higher-gain version of the basic Nemphasis Dark Lady. It looks rather of cool in a businesslike sort of way, although labelling the knobs Look, Hair and Legs feels a little, well, teenage, and unwittingly plays into the hands of a kind of '50s Italian stereotype. There's also a mini toggle Voice switch, which, given that it's labelled G and S, suggests we're shifting between a germanium and silicon circuit, thus representing both vintage and contemporary options.

Sounds

Legs is the gain control, Looks is level, and Hair is the tone control. However, Legs on its own won't simply give you a clean boost. Maxed out, with a little Look, you get a dark and swampy vibe that's great for blues boogie playing. Less Legs and more Look with the Voice switch set to 'G' results in a fuzzy, ragged lead tone that's great for Bolan-style rock; switch to the 'S' setting and the sound is smoother and more quintessentially classic rock.

Once you've set Legs to roughly match your output, Look and Hair can take glam rock in many different directions. Whacking out A and G chords while yelling 'Jet Boy stole my bay-beh' seems like somehow the right thing to do. Maxing out Hair and Look moves you into a world of surgical fuzzy distortion that's great for punk, and while Hair isn't the type of tone control to give you properly scooped mids, there are plenty of contemporary metal sounds here. Even at the pedal's extremes the difference between the 'G' and 'S' settings of the Voice control are well differentiated, and that's a bonus.

VT Comp

Of the three pedals on test this is both the most subtle and perhaps the most useful, as it's the sort of device that could become a ubiquitous part of your sound. Optical compressors attenuate the guitar's output by using a light source (mostly LEDs these days) and a photoconductive cell whose resistance decreases as the light is increased. Basically, the light shines brighter when you hit the guitar harder; this reduces the gain, and the controls manipulate the compression ratio and the effect's onset. Optical compressors do this in a very smooth and musical fashion that can even out your playing for that super-smooth funk approach or, for lead playing, it can emulate or enhance the apparent effect of a tube amp with a valve rectifier to give that kind of juicy 'sag' and 'swell' that changes your playing dynamic; it can also enhance detail and add sustain, because the compressor can boost quiet signals as well as limit loud ones. With this pedal we're back to sensibly-named knobs: Level, Compression and Attack.

Sounds

Having set the Level control to match the bypassed signal, Compression and Attack turn out to be very interactive. Keeping Attack low exercises the basic compression ratio. As you increase the value you move from a subtle smoothing effect to a more noticeable effect that's great for all things funk, from vintage George Benson leads to a processed Aztec Camera/Haircut 100 style clean pop rhythm sound. Turning Compression past 12 o'clock gives a very smooth sustained lead tone; if you want to add a bit of bite, just start playing with the Attack control which governs how the effect initially interacts with your note. The flexibility here gives you a similar level of control to what you might have experienced with a Boss CS-3 (not an optical device of course, but still a popular one), but the overall effect is much more open, and the VT doesn't overly colour your sound. A high Attack setting with a low-to-average Compression setting delivers a very transparent enhancement... the kind of set-and-forget setting that may be a useful 'always on' option.

Verdict

These pedals display very solid build quality and do exactly what they should in a very musical manner. The Liquid Mind is a flexible chorus that delivers good variety; as distortions go, the Dark Lady offers a lot of tonal fine-tuning, and the Voice switch is a real plus; the VT Comp is an excellent pedal that, if used judiciously, can make your guitar sound, well, better. At £149 there's going to be some competition from a few well-known boutique makers, while many lower-cost mass-produced units will deliver a similar level of functionality, but perhaps not tone. One thing's certain; Nemphasis pedals are well made and they offer well thought-out controls plus professional-level signal processing.

FINAL SCORE

DARK LADY DISTORTION	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**89%**

FINAL SCORE

VT COMP OPTICAL COMPRESSOR	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**18**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**18**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**89%**

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ITALIA
Imola GP Bass

The new GP version of the Imola bass adds a maple top, active electronics, humbuckers, and a super-whizzy set neck. Review by **Gareth Morgan**

Italia Guitars was founded in 1998 when the Mirr Corporation, a noted Korea instrument manufacturer, commissioned Trevor Wilkinson Design Associates in Southport to produce a line of instruments for them. Wilkinson was basically instructed to come up with something different, and those of you familiar with Italia basses and guitars will know exactly what 'different' came to mean.

Inspired by less feted, yet equally valid makes like Hagstrom, Crucianelli and Eko, Wilkinson's resulting Italia range combined quirky, nostalgia-packed looks while using modern materials and production methods to ensure they weren't just a bunch of show ponies but guitars and basses that were good to play and had the sounds to match. Even if you're an Italia naysayer, you have to admit that they create a talking point and add much needed colour and character to the grey world of the same old designs.

Italia celebrated its 15-year anniversary by introducing some swanky new models, and we've already had the pleasure of checking out one of them, the semi-hollowbody Imola, in our April 2013 issue (Vol 24 No 7). That first Imola bass was a stylish passive item with a nice variety of practical sounds, but now Wilkinson and Italia have introduced an upgraded model, and the term 'souped-up' has never before felt quite as appropriate a description. They've called it the Imola GP. Let's take a squizz.

Based very roughly on Ampeg's short-lived AEB-1 bass, a design that dates back to 1966, the GP represents a striking variation on that rather archaic instrument, not least thanks to the racing chequerboard patterning that frames top, sides and bottom of the fingerboard, and adorns the body's otherwise black binding strip – we're already thinking 'ska band' rather than 'Grand Prix car'. The chequered-flag inlay at the 12th fret is a perhaps less appealing detail but, still, it's certainly in keeping with the GP's visuals.

Alder body is hidden by the white finish – the only colour option

Full 34" scale neck and open-gear Wilkinson tuners

Based on the Ampeg AEB-1, the GP has racing chequerboard binding framing the top and the fingerboard

As this is the super-duper Imola, the body is made from alder, as opposed to korina, and the top capped with maple, although the opaque prism white finish renders the grain invisible. The body is 47mm thick, with no comfort contouring, and the shape stays true to the slightly downsized Ampeg form that characterised the original Imola bass. The single soundhole is different; the plain Imola has a twin ball-end type soundhole that echoes the traditional violin design, while the GP's is more stylised and sabre-like. The scratchplate has changed, too; gone is the huge, all-encompassing sea of plastic and in comes a somewhat smaller design rendered in a three-ply black/white/black that recalls a Jazzmaster guard crossed with the control area from a Rickenbacker 4001.

Whereas the original Imola's neck is secured via the time-honoured bolt-on method, the GP's maple neck employs the more traditional set-in method, with a thick white finish that both ↦

FACTFILE
Italia Imola GP Bass

DESCRIPTION **Part-hollow electric four-string bass. Made in Korea**
PRICE **£879 inc. soft case**

BUILD **Alder body with maple top and single chamber in upper section, bolt-on maple neck with 22 medium nickel frets on a rosewood fingerboard. Wilkinson WJ350 tuners and Wilkinson WBBC bridge. Chrome hardware**

ELECTRICS **Active with two Wilkinson IAB Active humbuckers. Volume and Balance controls and a three-band EQ**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Prism white only**
RANGE OPTIONS **None**

SCALE LENGTH
864mm/34"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 40mm
12th fret 57mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 20mm
12th fret 24mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 11mm
Bridge 19mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.5mm
12th fret bass 2mm
WEIGHT
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Chequered binding, racing flags... it's all very 2 Tone

Semi-hollow body gives a weight of 8.5lbs

The Imola GP really needs its active EQ in order to spring into life, but it really scores in the playability department

matches the body and obscures the nature of its construction (the basic Imola being a two-piece affair). The newly shallow depth of the neck is one alteration we heartily applaud, as the GP's profile is super-slim and plays extremely quickly. It's undoubtedly one of the speediest necks we've come across in recent times.

For the headstock, Italia have employed the squeezed oblong design with the slight protuberance past the G tuner that you'll find on every other Italia model. Alongside the silver, chunky Italia badge and trussrod access cover there are four chrome open-gear Wilkinson WJ350 tuners with small T-shaped buttons, and a nut made of grey Wilkaloid – a synthetic material similar to graphite.

The fingerboard is rosewood, and as well as the 12th fret flag inlays we mentioned earlier, this one differs from the basic Imola by having the full quota of pearloid dot markers, plus a further set of miniature white ones along the top edge. It also carries 22 medium nickel frets, although the economy of the cutaway design combined with a full body depth from fret 20 upwards renders the topmost two frets a little awkward to reach.

For the bridge they've fitted a Wilkinson WBBC, an old-school Fender-like unit with a chromed steel baseplate and four brass saddles. No change here, and when something as simple as this works so well, we're glad of it.

In a final twist on the original Imola, this GP version is also active, powered by a 9v battery housed in a quick-release compartment on the back, and it comes not with the single-coil, paired pole pickups of the older Imola, but with two Wilkinson IAB humbuckers, although they're still located in the Jazz Bass positions. As well as Volume and Balance controls, there's a swanky three-band EQ with Bass, Middle and Treble controls that should add a much more up-to-date tonal sheen to the Imola GP's '60s stylings.

Same bridge, but new humbuckers

Volume, Balance and a three-band EQ

Sounds

Beginning with the EQ set flat, the GP's twin pickup sound reveals itself to be nicely detailed, with plenty of lively harmonics, although not quite at Musicman level, and the bottom end is solid without managing to endanger too many fixtures and fittings, exuding a pleasing growl at the E string, becoming zingier and raspier as you move across the neck. There's maybe just a fraction too much high mid informing the top end of the sound, though, and while this slightly nasal edge could well aid clarity in a mix, it might also come over as being a touch synthetic in character. Still, it's not too bad, and enough pure high frequency bleeds through for unchoked-sounding clarity and bite. The soloed bridge pickup is tight, nasal and burpy, too thin-sounding for all-round use without recourse to the EQ, while the neck humbucker exudes earthy P-bassisms with growling lows and a fairly dark midrange plus softer highs which choke a bit if you pop the G string. There's some good stuff here, but so far every selection is crying out for a helping injection of solid bottom end.

Fortunately, when you dial in the EQ, the GP transforms into a completely different animal. Adding bass really wakes things up: the room starts shaking, trouser legs flap with every note... there's plenty of power on offer here. Half bass boost in neck mode is arguably how the GP should have sounded in the first place: full and fat, with a weighty bottom end and real impact in the midrange (though the top strings are still a touch light).

Adding extra Mid EQ reclaims definition, encouraging a raspy edge to return, but boosting Treble not only brings on a snappier attack but also moves the GP to the honky-sounding side – and bad things happen to your sound there. With the bridge pickup we'd advise adding Bass EQ only, as this fattens matters up to offer a reasonable pop/funk tone. In twin pickup mode, extra bass produces a rich, full-range sound with reasonably well-balanced high mids; boosting Middle increases the punch, and upping Treble promotes the high mid issue a little but produces fairly open, natural-sounding highs.

Verdict

The Italia Imola GP is a bass with stand-out looks, but it's one that needs the active EQ to be set to your tastes to really spring into life. With that done, it's good; it doesn't have quite the impressive tonal variations offered by Sandberg's Elektra TT, the active J-style bass currently acting as our mental benchmark in this price bracket, but it's not far behind. It really scores in the playability department, though, and this, together with the styling, will be what makes it a contender.

FINAL SCORE

ITALIA IMOLA GP 4-STRING BASS	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**19**/20
Sound	**16**/20
Value for money	**16**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**86%**

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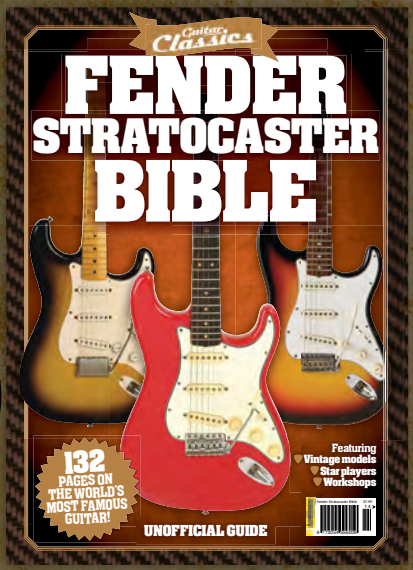

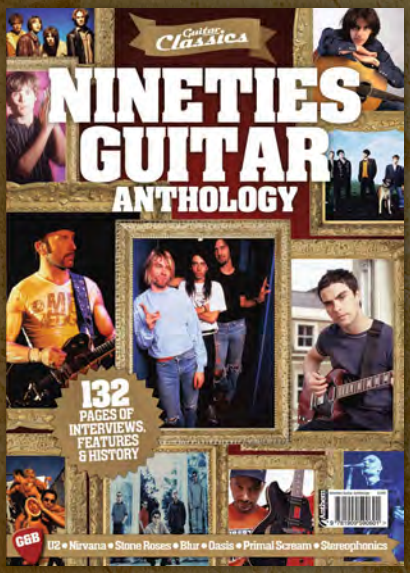

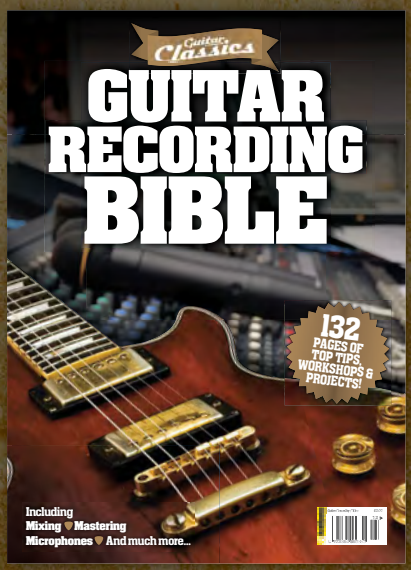

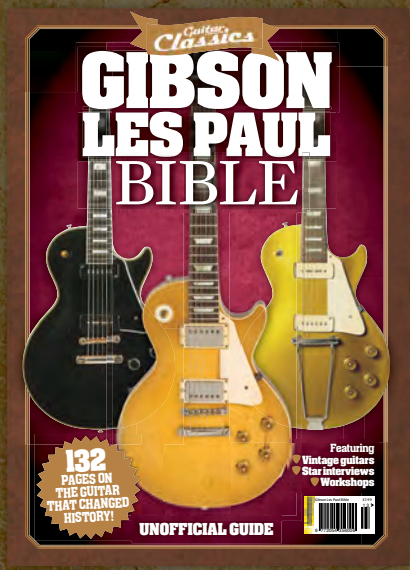

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MICHAEL KELLY

Sojourn Travel Bass

Play bass, must travel? There are many weeny four-strings to choose from, and the Michael Kelly takes the trad approach. Review by **Gareth Morgan**

It's no surprise that travel basses have become so popular in recent times. These miniaturised instruments with their minimal features are designed to be taken on an airplane as hand luggage or just about anywhere where space is at a premium. A fair few companies, Hofner and Traveler Guitars among them, offer solidbody versions, but you'll also find electro-acoustic versions such as this Sojourn Travel bass from Florida, USA-based Michael Kelly Guitars.

The STB is a dinky little thing, quite toy-like and fun-looking, measuring 320mm from upper to lower rear bout, around 905mm standing on its end, and weighing a paltry 1.66kg/3.84lbs. Made in China, it has a proper solid spruce top surrounded by single-ply ABS binding. The back and sides are mahogany, and so is the neck, which is secured to the body with a glued dovetail joint. A rosewood-faced squashed-oblong headstock houses four chrome close-gear tuners (being standard size, they do look a little incongruous), there's a white Graphtech Tusq nut, and the rosewood fingerboard is home to 19 medium nickel frets and abalone dot inlays. While you can use the STB solely for acoustic purposes, it's fitted with a B-Band A1.2 preamp and a 22R undersaddle transducer. Fitted on the rosewood bridge under the saddle section, the pickup utilises their electret film technology which means it acts somewhat like a condenser mic. There's a single soundhole-mounted Volume control and internal 9v battery pouch which, being untethered, bounces around inside the bass if you get a little overexcited in the throes of playing.

Sounds

The first issue to deal with is a scale length that measures much less than your standard bass – at 24.5", it's just under a traditional Gibson guitar scale. This will instantly make it a nailed-on joy for younger players or those with diminutive hands, but it may well feel very cramped to anyone with sausage-sized digits.

In terms of the sound, everything depends on your chosen approach and hand positioning, from a pick near the bridge to fingerstyle nearer the neck. We plumped for fingerstyle, and it must be said that the Sojourn's sound is quite agreeable with a well-projected earthy tone with reasonable bottom end, a solid, even midrange and clarity without brittleness at the G string.

Plug the STB in and dialling in some Bass EQ at the amp for more weight, the tone is practical with a pleasing growl and more of that solid midrange on show, although now with a zingier attack, and while there's distinctly more snappy bite in the trebles, the thinner strings are still practical.

Verdict

The Sojourn is a good little bass, well-made despite its rather toy-like appearance, and managing to sound bigger and tonally more lush than it really has a right to, given the size and the lack of electro-acoustic tone shaping. Our worry is the price. If you scope out the competition it's one of the more costly travel basses, which will count against it, and it's up against the new breed of plastic-stringed travel bases, which provide a more double-bass style sound and often come with excellent electronics. So £450 is a fair hit, but this Michael Kelly is a fun and very likeable bass to doodle around on, and it's worth a look.

The Sojourn's acoustic sound is quite agreeable, and with some added bass EQ at the amp the plugged-in tone is too

FINAL SCORE

MICHAEL KELLY SOJOURN TRAVEL BASS	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**19**/20
Sound	**16**/20
Value for money	**14**/20
Vibe	**17**/20
TOTAL	**84%**

FACTFILE

Michael Kelly Sojourn Travel Bass

DESCRIPTION **Hollowbody travel bass. Made in China**
PRICE **£449 with gig bag**

BUILD **Spruce top with single-ply ABS binding, mahogany back/sides, 19 frets. Closed gear tuners and rosewood bridge**

ELECTRICS **B-Band A1.2 preamp and B-Band 22R UST undersaddle transducer pickup. Volume control only**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Natural only**
RANGE OPTIONS **None**

SCALE LENGTH
864mm/24.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 54mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 22mm
Ninth fret 24mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 11mm
Bridge 16mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 2.5mm
WEIGHT
1.66kg/3.84lbs

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Lost And FOUND

There's nothing Len Leslie loves more than a project to get busy on, and his extensive guitar collection is stuffed full of 'not so popular' instruments that he's rescued, improved and customised. Lars Mullen hears the stories behind each one

'I love working on guitars,' admits Len Leslie. 'My workshop is a dining room table and a drawer full of tools, and couple of cushions from the sofa to rest the guitars on. I've always enjoyed taking things apart and repairing them – first motorcycles and washing machines, then eventually guitars! I have an engineering degree plus some basic electronics from working at Rolls-Royce aero engines, and thanks to a college woodworking course I can handle a chisel or two as well.

'It's such a shame when something gets thrown away just because you can't get the parts, so I started making my own. These days you can buy guitar parts more easily than you used to, but I still like to make my own. Some of these guitars I've brought back completely from the dead; on others I've changed the electrics or slightly altered the cosmetics, or just set them up for my style of fingerpicking.

'My first project guitar was this Hagstrom H45E electro-acoustic from '65. It was the first acoustic I bought, back in '74. I found it in a junk shop in Bath, covered in emulsion paint, with a £10 price tag, but I could see there was something about this guitar under all the paint that oozed quality. In reality it's a knock-off of a Gibson J-160E as used by John Lennon and George Harrison, but I've installed a Fishman pickup system under the bridge. Note the Mickey Mouse on the pickguard – I blame my kids, not for putting it on, but for leaving sheets of stickers lying around when they were little. Mickey's found his way onto a quite a few of my guitars!

'I have another Hagstrom acoustic, a rather unusual La Rita model aimed at the classical/folk market and built in 1967. It used to belong to a seaman, and was badly damaged in a storm; it was repaired well, but there are still some visible scars. The neck and body are maple, the top is spruce, and it's the best nylon-strung guitar I've played. I used it on a track called *Be Seeing You*, on my last album, *Just About To Hit The Wall*.'

Len's acoustic fingerpicking style, bringing out melodies and basslines with his thumb, led him to remove some of the strings from his 12-string Fender. 'Yes – for clarity, I've removed the octave D, A and low E strings,' he confirms. 'It's great for the bass line, but I still have the jangle on the top three strings.

'This is actually a hybrid, with a Shenandoah neck on the smaller Fender Villager 12-string body. I'm not sure of the date, as the original list of Fender's first-series flat top serial numbers has been lost, but I think the parts are approximately from '68.

'I know this original 12-string Shenandoah dreadnought dates from '65, as it has chequerboard binding which was only applied in the first year of production. The psychedelic look of the scratchplate is actually due to the gold paint on the underside which has reacted with the glue on the felt pads that keep it away from the body.

'Both of these have the aluminium rod inside, promoted by Fender as the Acoustic Tension Tube, developed by Roger Rossmeisl and fitted to various Fender acoustics in this period. Nicknamed the" aluminium broomstick", it was designed to stop the body from bowing. I'm not sure it was a great idea,

Hagstrom H45E from 1965 and a Hagstrom La Rita

to be honest... a lot of these guitars now have cracked tops as over the years the rod has pushed the end of the body out as the tops have moved. I've been lucky with these two, though, and they're the best 12-string necks I've ever played – they're the same necks as on a Fender Electric XII, the one with the cashew nut headstock.'

We'll drop in on Fender again during our visit with Len, but first we turn to another big name, Epiphone, with a couple of corkers from the '60s. 'This little FT45 Cortez is a '68 – I got it on eBay,' he says. 'A lot of people are wary about buying old acoustics from the internet, and I must admit there's a high risk factor compared to buying solidbodies. This one had been in somebody's loft for 30 years, and was still in the original cardboard box. The strings were so rusty, I had to cut them off! I worked on it for a whole day, and as I wiped away years of dust and gunge it started to come back to life.

'Apart from the pattern of the sunburst and the design of the machineheads, it's basically the same as a Gibson LG-2. A lot of these guitars have had the adjustable bridges replaced as players have said it affects the sound, but I beg to differ, and I think this one sounds beautiful.

'Here's another nice Epiphone acoustic, a Frontier from 1966. It's another Gibson-made Epiphone, with the same construction as a Gibson Dove acoustic. This is a really nice guitar and it's special in my eyes as it's the same model played by Gram Parsons, a real hero of mine. I always liked country rock, starting with the Eagles and working my way back through Poco and the Byrds, and settling down with Gram. I love his songs and the way he sang... it's a shame he died so young.

'I also have two old Kay guitars, although they're miles apart in design. The first one is an acoustic archtop dating from around 1955, making it probably the oldest guitar I have. It was in bad shape, so I've repaired it with a variety of parts that I've acquired over the years. It has tuners from a Hofner Committee, a modern replica Hofner tailpiece, a scratchplate that I designed myself, and an unidentified ebony bridge. The fat, wide neck is ideal for big jazzy chords. This is one of the better Kay models that were sold along with the budget brands like Harmony and Valco. Like a lot of guitars from this period, it may have arrived here via a passenger on a boat. American guitars were slow arriving into the UK after the war, and that's why so many British guitar players of that era cut their teeth on Hofners, Framuses and Hagstroms.

'My other Kay is this little four-string tenor guitar dating from around 1964. Tenor guitars were very popular from the '30s onwards, a time when the banjo was starting to go out of fashion. They were introduced so banjo players could literally swap over to the guitar without having to learn new chords. Like a banjo they really project, and this one is loud! There's still a label on the back of the headstock from the original Chicago ➔

Single bass strings help fingerpicking clarity

Left, a nine-string Fender Villager/Shenandoah hybrid; right, a'65 Shenandoah

1968 Epiphone Cortez and a '66 Frontier

1950s Kay archtop and a mid-'60s Kay tenor guitar

shop from where it was sold. Tenors went out of fashion when six-string acoustics got a hold, although they had a brief remission in the '60s when Rick Dougherty of the Kingston Trio appeared playing a tenor.

'A lot of my guitars were in a terrible condition when I bought them, and these two Yamaha acoustics – a six-string FG-180 from '70 and a 12-string FG-230 from '71 – were looking really sorry for themselves. Both are first series flat tops, known as the Nippon Gakki "red label" models. The quality is superb, with all solid woods. They became known as the poor man's Martin, and to this day they sound and play superb. John Martyn and Bert Jansch had them as back-up stage guitars. Over the years Yamaha flat tops haven't really altered that much, but it worked back then... so why change it?

'These Yamahas have the same action on the lower strings as the top three, which is just how I like it for my thumbpick style. On electric I use a hybrid style with fingers and a plectrum, a little like Albert Lee. I once shook his hand hoping some talent would rub off, but I still can't play a tenth of what he does...'

As a youngster, Len had a wish-list of cool guitars. 'There were three guitars I ached for during the '70s – a Gibson SG, a Fender Telecaster, and a Guild acoustic. I'm not sure why I chose Guild, but their flat tops had a really good reputation at the time.

'I waited for ages and finally found this 1986 Guild D25-NT dreadnought, which I got from a guy in the Midlands. It arrived in a mint case, so I had I my fingers crossed when I opened it – and sure enough the guitar was mint as well. It's my studio acoustic, and it's got its own character... the politeness of a Gibson but the warmth of a Martin.

'I've also acquired a concert-sized Guild F20-NT from 1982. This one is very similar to the mahogany M20 that Nick Drake reputedly used. It's a great little guitar this one, with lots of volume and tone for its size. Bob Dylan recorded all his early songs on a small-bodied Gibson Nick Lucas acoustic – I've also seen him playing an Epiphone Cortez.

'Here's another classic acoustic from the '60s, the good old Harmony Sovereign. Harmony were churning out guitars like nobody's business – at this point they were the biggest guitar maker in the world, more or less outselling all the other brands combined. This is a big guitar with a big, metallic, bluesy sound, and one of the last to be built in Chicago. It's reported that Pete Townshend used one for the recording of *Tommy*, and some say that Jimmy Page used one for the acoustic parts of *Stairway To Heaven*. I'm not sure if any of that has ever been proved, though.

'This little Fender Newporter is also from the first series of Fender flat tops, although it was aimed at the student market. Neil Diamond and Johnny Cash both used them at one time, and I spotted Jackson Browne open up his set at Glastonbury with one a few years ago, so I thought if it's okay for him, it'll be ideal for me! This was a very enjoyable project; it arrived in a really bad way after being grossly neglected and over-sprayed with some nasty polyurethane varnish. I worked on it for ages, taking it back to the wood by hand. It's sounding good and playing really well now. It's got a neck that feels almost identical to a '60s Strat.

Two Yamahas – an FG-180 and a 12-string FG-230

Guild D25-NT and F20-NT

Harmony Sovereign and a mahogany-top Fender Newporter

A Framus Zenith and an Ovation Elite 1718

Next up is a kind of European equivalent to Len's Kay archtop, a '50s Framus Zenith Model 17. 'This originally belonged to a friend who introduced me to guitar around 1971. Many years later we hooked up on again on Facebook and I noticed he was prepared to give away a "kept in the loft" guitar to anyone who wanted to renovate it and use it. It turned out that it was the original guitar he taught me chords on over 40 years ago! I've made a new pickguard, but that's about all. It was imported into the UK via Ivor Mairants. There are photos out there of both Paul McCartney and George Harrison playing Zeniths when they were youngsters.

'I was never quite sure about bowl-backed Ovations, but they were one of the first acoustics to have a real under-the-bridge pickup system. Before that, you had to put a mic in front of the soundhole and sit very still! I remember seeing Status Quo playing *Living On An Island* using Ovations. I have this early-'90s Elite 1718 with a spruce top and the leaf-design soundholes. It belonged to a banjo player who hardly ever went near it, so it hadn't been touched. It does record really well with a mic, and I've used it on several recordings and for a lot of gigs.'

Len is happy to argue the finer points of different tonewoods on acoustic guitars, but less picky when it comes to electrics. 'I close my ears when arguments start up comparing pickups on Les Pauls from different years,' he laughs. 'The difference is so diminutive that it can all be settled with a little EQ. I personally think there are three subjects where there's more crap talked about than anything else in the whole world – wine, tea, and electric guitars!

'Earlier I mentioned that one of the electrics I ached for as a youngster was a cherry red SG with P90s, and eventually I found an SG Classic. Pete Townshend was the main reason I've always adored this model. He used nothing else on stage from about '68 to '72; I saw him play one at the Pavilion in Bath, and of course he used one at Woodstock. This one dates from 2003, and I bought it from Peter Cook's in London. The wider neck makes it fabulous to play. These days mains electrics is a lot cleaner and there's hardly any neon lighting at venues anymore, so I don't seem to get the buzzing problem that used to occur with P90s.

'In the Gibson catalogue this Les Paul was known as the Firebrand Deluxe, and the logo is actually burnt into the headstock. This was a budget line that Gibson brought out in '77 which also included an SG and a 335. This one dates from '80, just after they changed the bodies from walnut to mahogany. I've coiled-tapped the T-top humbuckers for versatility, and personalised it with a cream pickguard and trussrod cover from an Epiphone Slash Les Paul.

'I have really nice black '77 Strat with the much-cursed three-bolt neck. There's so much crap talked about this, but there's nothing wrong with it whatsoever. If the neck fits the pocket, three bolts are quite sufficient. I saw Glenn Frey of the Eagles play a black one with a maple neck – it looked fabulous.

'It was ages before I bought a Strat, as during the' 70s and '80s everyone and their brother played a Strat. I got a Musicman instead, but eventually bought this one around 1990. As a fingerpicker I found I was always turning it down by accidentally hitting the volume, so I moved it to where the middle control was and rewired the lower tone control for all three pickups.

'Here's something a bit rare, an Ovation PF22. This was a prototype for a series that didn't make the production line in 1979. It was made up from various parts from other guitars in the catalogue. I found it on eBay, advertised as having wiring problems. I thought it would be a cool project, so I treated myself to a new soldering iron and took the plunge. The wiring was a rat's nest, but I managed to sort it out, and found the pickup permutations are quite astonishing. They are handmade split-coil units, a bit like the ones on a Fender ↔

Gibson SG Classic and LP Firebrand

1977 maple-neck Strat and a rare Ovation PF22

12-string electric. Various switches allow the two halves of each pickups to be in series or parallel, or both pickups out of phase, and so much more. I've used it for recording and live stuff, and the versatility is amazing – it's all in there, from a sweet Tele to that crazy Burns Wild Dog sound. It's said that "PF22" actually stands for Peavey f***er... there's quite a bit on the internet as to the reason why!'

Len's final boyhood dream guitar was a Telecaster, and yes, he's now got one. 'I bought this in 1976 from the guy who used to be the editor of *Beat Instrumental* magazine. He advertised it, but nobody was prepared to travel to Marazion right down at the bottom of Cornwall to see it. As it happened a year later I was on a camping holiday close by, and on the off-chance I called him... and he still had it. Originally a guy ordered this guitar a custom "bathroom pink" in '71, but when he went to collect it he walked in the shop, said "Wrong pink" and walked out! It looks pretty good now with the body taken back to the natural ash, my home-made black guard, and fitted out Muddy Waters-style with a pair of Fender Bassman amp controls.

'I also have another project Fender, a little short scale Mustang from '68, which arrived completely unplayable, because it had been stored in the wrong place for many years.

'I have soft spot for semi-acoustics. The Coronado, another Roger Rossmeisl design, was basically Fender's answer to a Gibson 335. It's a nice guitar, a little like a poor man's Gretsch, but Fender really missed the boat as the early '60s trend for thinline models was dwindling when it was launched around '65. I found this one in a junk shop in Bath, all original except for the Bigsby.

'My real Gretsch is a deep-bodied single-cut '64 Double Anniversary 6117. I bought this from the son of Donald Griffiths, lead guitarist in Aswad. This is currently my fave for solo gigs and low-intensity band work.

'I think most guitar collectors have a bass or two, and I have a pair that I'm really pleased with. My love for Guild acoustics merges into this '78 Guild B-301, once fretted, now fretless. It's been used and abused but still performs brilliantly and it's really cool for jazz and rockabilly; with flatwound strings it really does sound like a double bass. I think these Guild bass pickups are the best, ever.

'This other Guild bass, an SB-202, was built in 1982 and is a recent find. These were only made for two years and are very rare, especially in the UK. Guild decided to remodel their B-302 to look a little more Fenderish, but the neck, pickups and circuitry stayed the same. It's a big, heavy brute with a solid ash body. At some point it's been stripped and had a new scratchplate fitted. For a passive bass it has a wide tonal range and a lot of power, and it's an excellent out-and-out rock instrument.

'I'm not sure of the date of this Epiphone Crestwood Custom as someone sprayed over the serial, but it's around '65 and was probably cherry red before it was pelham blue. It was up on eBay, and the mods meant it was a nice price. I think it looks pretty good with a sawn-off Bigsby, a homemade tension bar, and non-original knobs. All the electrics are stock, and who ever did the last re-fret and set up knew what they were doing – it's the fastest and lowest action I've ever seen.

'The very cute Rickenbacker is a 450-12 12-string from '69. This is a cheaper solidbody but I think it sounds identical ↦

Stripped '71 Tele and a '68 Mustang

1960s Fender Coronado II and a Gretsch Double Anniversary

A defretted Guild B-301 and an '82 SB-202

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to the more expensive Roger McGuinn 370-12 and the natural finish is a little unusual.'

The final bass is a much-customised Gibson. 'I'm proud of all my project guitars, but especially this,' Len says. 'I once had an original '63 EB-0 bass, but it got stolen. I still had the original "mudbucker" humbucker from it though, and about five years ago I chanced on a stripped EB-4L body and neck which came with bridge and tuners, but no electrics or plastics. Late last year I finally spliced the old mudbucker into the body with a new tone circuit and coil tap and made up the pickguards to my own taste. With the modern circuitry, new roundwound strings and the pickup now in the mid-position, this bass outperforms a Precision!'

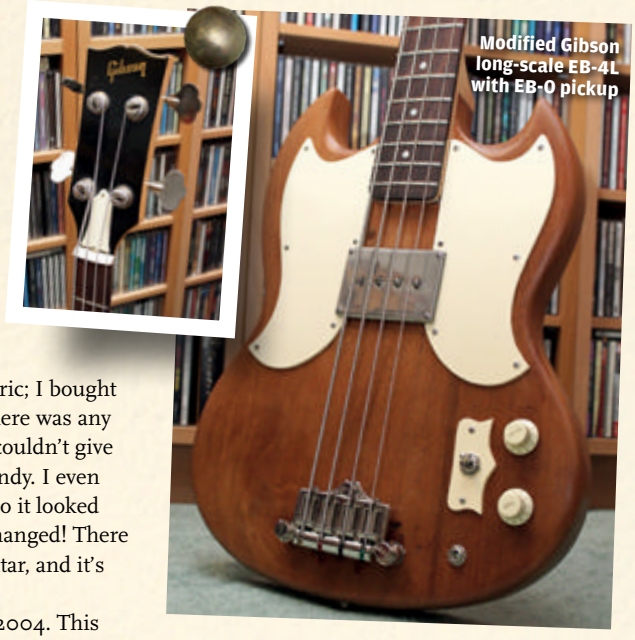
Len's early '80s Gordon-Smith GS-1 has been through a few changes too. 'The previous owner refinished it in British racing green and added a Seymour Duncan stacked P90 plus a replacement scratchplate. It didn't have any controls as he said he wanted a modern smooth look, but I built a tone circuit and added controls. This is a little more than a poor man's Les Paul Junior – it's a great player and the pickup just shouts.

'This '02 Hofner HE179 prototype is a little rare. They produced about 100 samples in China as a marketing plan for a new range, but they scrapped the idea and reissued the Colorama instead. It's quite Jazzmaster-ish, and a lot of the parts are handmade. I heard that 50 were destroyed while the rest started turning up all over the place. This one cost me £100 – I've heard of one in Australia going for nearly 10 times that price.'

Lastly, Len arrives with two completely unmodified guitars, and explains why. 'The Gibson Firebird and Epiphone Casino are the guitars I'd run back in the house for if I smelt smoke. The Casino was my first decent electric; I bought it in '74 for £100, long before there was any concept of vintage guitars. You couldn't give these away; they just weren't trendy. I even made a Gibson truss rod cover so it looked like Gibson... how times have changed! There are a lot of memories in this guitar, and it's still 100 per cent original.

'The Firebird VII dates from 2004. This was a pure indulgence buy. I spent ages in my youth looking at pictures of Brian Jones and his Firebird. As all Firebird players know, it neck-dives, but the trade-off is the sound. I love it – it's almost like a super-powerful powerful Fender. Johnny Winter was another hero of mine and also a Firebird player, so there's a big influence here. I still think it's the coolest six-string on the planet.

'As you've probably noticed, I've not been one to chase after the classic guitars like some collectors do. I've collected on a budget. I've hardly sold any guitars over the years, and I think this proves that I've always bought carefully. I couldn't really get rid of any of them. I see them as my children... I just couldn't do it!


Modified Gibson long-scale EB-4L with EB-0 pickup

Modded Epi Crestwood Custom and Rick 450-12 in Mapleglo

Refinished Gordon-Smith GS-1 and a Hofner HE179

Price of place: Len's '60s Casino and a more recent Firebird VII with chrome hardware

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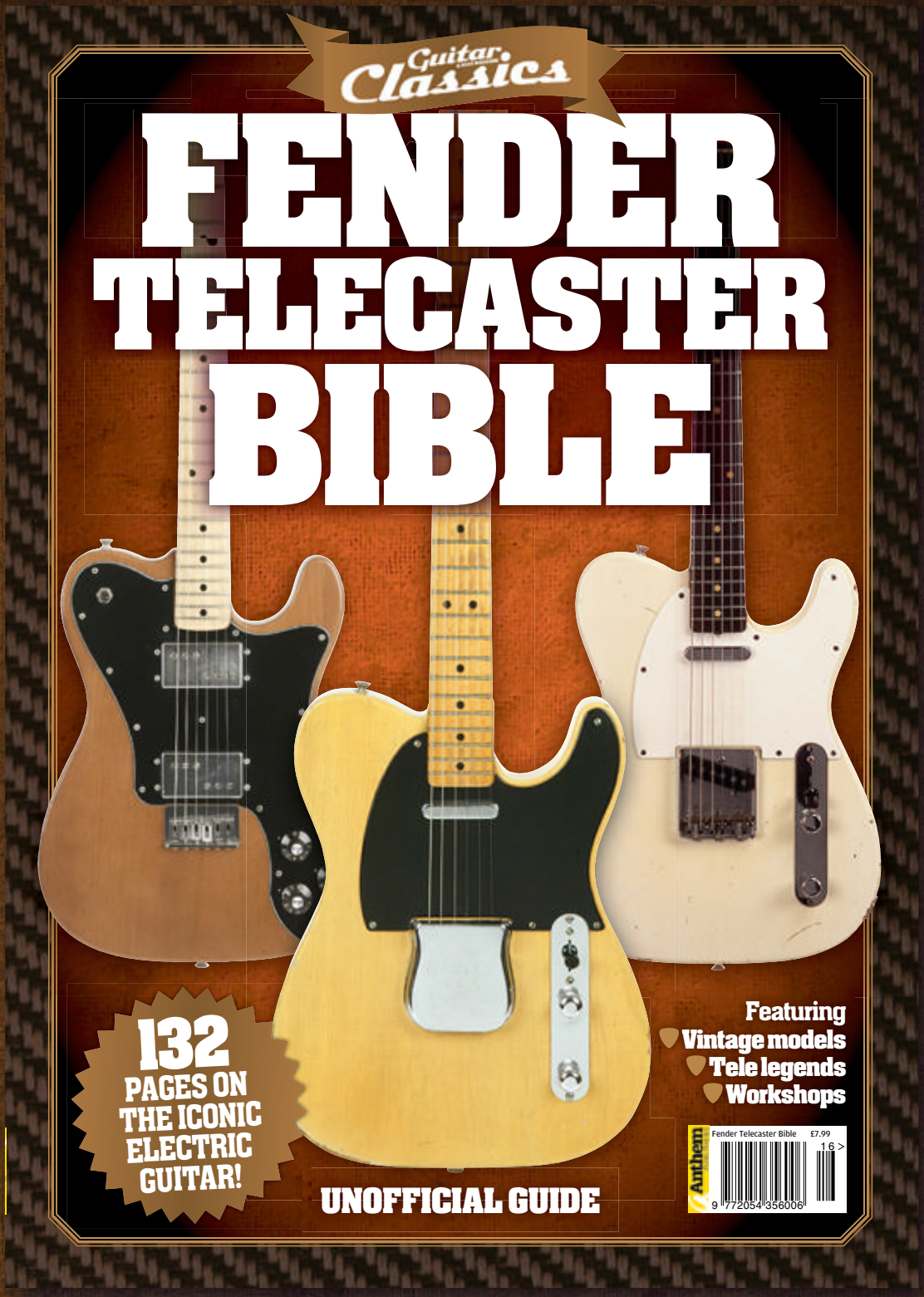

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THE BISHOP OF DENMARK STREET

THE GOALS OF A GUITARIST

From public performer to private player, **Sid Bishop** reckons there are many ways of being a musician...

We all need something to aspire to, and right from the very start, if we have any goals at all, we would have to come to a decision where we are going with this new-found obsession. Do we yearn to be rich and famous like some of our heroes, earning pots of money and picking up lots of girls, or even spend years seriously attempting to reproduce the jaw-dropping skills of the likes of Stevie Ray, EVH or Joe Satriani? Just to get into a band and do a few local pub gigs is enough for most, especially those of us who have wives, families, and 'proper' jobs. Furthermore, I am reliably informed that around half of all guitarists never gig at all, being content to practice and learn in the privacy of their own bedrooms, just playing for their own amusement. A career in music doesn't suit everybody, let alone genuine stardom; it can all be a bit of a lottery really, and if your goal is simply to be as good as you can be, then that's probably enough for you. There is a theory that everyone only rises to the level of their own competence.

Chuck Berry: the essential riff

Merely to play better would be another worthwhile goal. Getting better is just a part of a lifelong never-ending quest for perfection for many of us, and just what might that be? Perfection, a nebulous concept at best, can only be subjective. Would we feel that we'd achieved our goal once we are able to squeeze out a passable Chuck Berry intro, or, for example, get our fingers round Paul Kossof's classic solo from *Alright Now*? I managed to nail both of those many years ago. So was that the end? In a word, no! Jerry Garcia's solo from the Grateful Dead's *Beat It On Down The Line* still eludes me, and I've been plugging away at that one since 1967.

I've been playing for over 50 years now and I continue to learn, add more to my repertoire, and, as a result, I am steadily getting better... or, at least, I hope so. I was certainly no teenage guitar prodigy like Ry Cooder or Rick Derringer, so I've had to work hard. It's been rewarding, though, and I've been lucky enough to have had a satisfying and memorable career. The process never stops and there's always something new to absorb. In truth there's never an 'end' as such, or some point where you can sit back and say to yourself 'wow, I can play guitar now' then advance no further.

Another goal, if you are serious about the guitar, is to equip yourself with the best collection of gear that you can beg or borrow the money for. To an audience, who are often more knowledgeable and observant than we give them credit for, you will present an impressive figure, draped as you are with a decent quality 'name' guitar and amplified by a comparable piece of electronic wizardry. They know, trust me. To your bandmates your choice of gear, and the financial investment that you've put into it, underpins your commitment – and finally, if you have good kit, then you also feel better about yourself and inevitably have more confidence in the way you work. In actuality, of course, if you are a competent musician, you can easily get away with gigging a £300 Korean-made guitar rather than an American original costing 10 times as much, and the end result will be just as satisfactory for all concerned. Many do, including me.

Jerry Garcia, Sid's nemesis

The final goal must be, not to give up, in spite of whatever obstructions might get in the way, and stick at it. The rewards will come to you in the end.

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DAVE HILL
WORKSHOP

Feel The Noize: Dave Hill's Sam Li Custom Guitar

Owned by Slade's Dave Hill for 47 years and used to record many of the Wolverhampton rockers' mightiest songs, this much-modded custom guitar is a true icon of glam. **Steve Clarke** grabs the chance to place it under the microscope...

Dave Hill: 'This guitar is the Slade sound'

If you look at any YouTube songs of Slade in the early '70s performing on *Top Of The Pops*, the chances are you will see Dave Hill using this guitar. I've covered a table with a sheet in readiness for the guitar's visit to our workshop, and as I lay out my tools Dave tells us that this guitar was used on every Slade hit... regardless of other guitars he may be seen using on various promo videos and shows. 'As soon as you plug it in to a small Fender amp, this guitar is THE Slade sound,' he assures us.

Being given permission to examine this rock icon is a special thing, as you've got to appreciate the value of this guitar – not only for its countless studio and live appearances, but also because it was bought for Dave by his father in the late '60s. This not only contributes an all-important sentimental factor but also means that the guitar predates even Slade, adding even more significance.

The guitar arrived in a new Gibson case that fits it perfectly, and the first thing that strikes you as the guitar is lifted out is

the weight, which is approximately 8.5lbs. Considering its history and the sheer amount of work it has done, the condition of the guitar is, generally speaking, quite good; of course there's been some damage along the way and some headstock repairs too, but this a unique-looking guitar with a great history and vibe.

Early days

In 1968, before Slade had achieved any success, Dave's father took him to London to buy this guitar. It was built by Sam Li (aka Lee), who had a workshop in Gerrard Place in the late '60s. There is a story that Sam Li may have worked at some point on Peter Green's Les Paul; although he had a reputation as a good repairman and enjoyed a good trade working as a set-up man for Selmer's, he could also refinish guitars. Sam's strong points, however, did not include wiring and guitar electronics... more on this later.

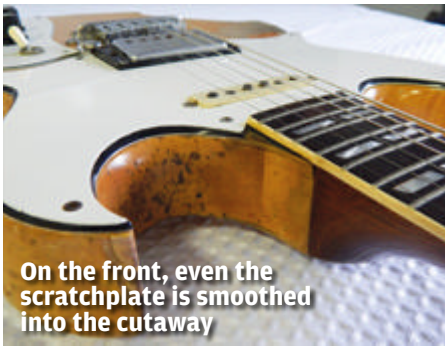
The Sam Li guitar was in the window of a Shaftesbury Avenue shop when Dave spotted it, and his father purchased it for £220. Shaftesbury Avenue, as we know, also gave its name to a brand of guitars, Shaftesbury, an import line distributed by Rose Morris between 1968 and 1974. Rose Morris also had the concessions for Marshall and Rickenbacker, and Rickenbacker-alikes appeared under the Shaftesbury name in the latter part of 1968, including a six-string, a 12-string and a bass, all modelled on the Rickenbacker 330. Hardware and pickups were vaguely similar to the originals and were of fairly good quality. Interestingly, the original toggle switch on Dave Hill's guitar is metal, which is very much like the one on the 330-type Shaftesbury guitars.

The first TV use of this guitar can be seen on a black and white film of Slade performing a Paul McCartney song called *Martha My Dear* in May 1969. Having done a timeline on this guitar, it's interesting to see when things got changed along the way.

In January 1971 the track *Get Down And Get With It* was released, and the guitar at this point looked much the same as when it was purchased, with a fat, almost SG-shaped maple body, a humbucker in the bridge, a single coil in the neck, and a large scratchplate surrounding both pickups. There was a separate control plate with two volume and two tone pots, but the metal toggle switch was located in the lower part of the control plate, near the bridge volume pot. A Gibson Tun-O-Matic bridge and tailpiece was fitted, and behind the tailpiece was a small plastic plaque with the words 'Custom Made' inscribed on it. The plaque is slightly smaller than the ones fitted to Gibson 345/335 models as they would have small ornate squares at either end, but the guitar was not actually custom-made for Dave. The neck is taken from a Gibson ES-345 and has Grover machineheads fitted.

Dave loved the pickguard design so much that he employed it on his later John Birch guitars

Rear of the maple body, with chamfers on the cutaways



On the front, even the scratchplate is smoothed into the cutaway

The Sam Li guitar was in the window of a shop in London's Shaftesbury Avenue when Dave spotted it, and his father bought it for £220

Body

The large body of this double-cutaway guitar is made of maple, ochre in colour and worn away in the upper part where the arm would rest (or, in Dave's case, never be still). It's actually quite a complex shape, with different levels and contours blending into one another. The whole top of the body 'steps down' from the area under the scratchplate to the lower part of the body, and there's an edge-contour in the forearm area which has discoloured over the years with wear: it looks very smooth and shiny. Around the area of the horns the body thickness is slightly more than that of a Les Paul Standard, and the lower horn keeps the thickness along the bottom of the guitar, but is bevelled into the cutaway. The top horn is the same until the edge of the scratchplate where it starts to step down twice and becomes thinner. Looking at this unusual design from different angles, it's really quite tastefully done. There are plenty of the knocks and dents you'd expect to see, and every one of them would have a story to tell.

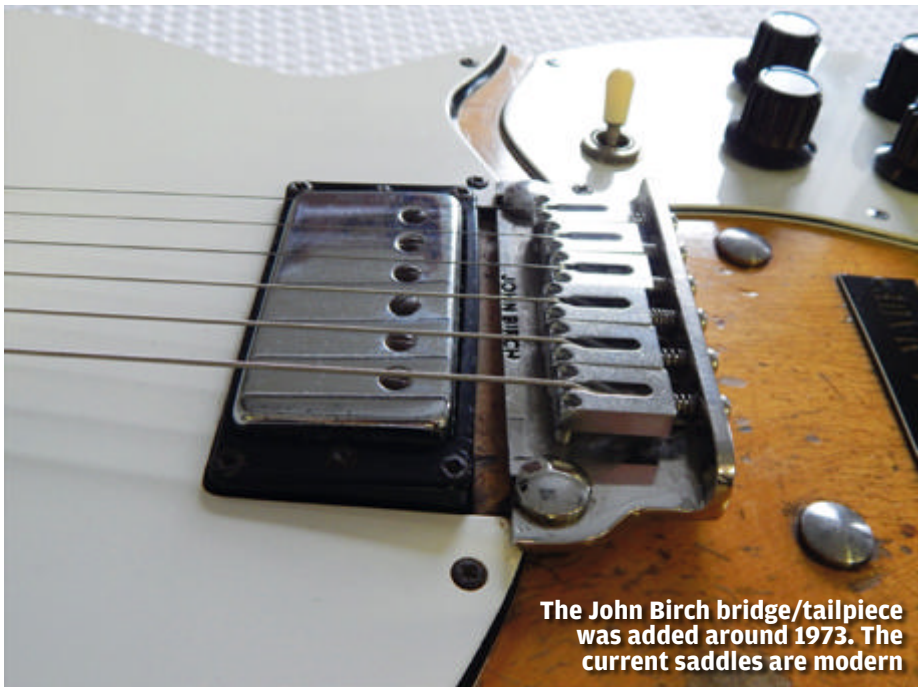
Neck

As we've already seen, the neck is a one-piece mahogany item taken from a Gibson ES-345 semi-acoustic, and it's been fitted very well. The headstock did carry its original 'crown' inlay in the '70s, but on the treble side, where some damage occurred at some point, the headstock repair has resulted in the whole of the front being re-sprayed to black, and thus the inlay has been lost. It's a little hard to understand why it couldn't have been kept; there are a number of ways to get around the problem, but the repair is nicely done. In the early days the back of the neck was darker in the machinehead area, but today it is all the same colour. The neck measures 41mm at the nut and 51mm at the 12th fret.

The zero fret was added not when the guitar was put together, but at a later date

Peghead retains the Gibson logo but the lower inlay is lost

Serial number 'PP 48' is stamped into the back of the headstock


The John Birch bridge/tailpiece was added around 1973. The current saddles are modern

The rosewood fingerboard is in good condition and the distinctive double parallelogram inlays are nicely cut. A re-fret has taken place, and the frets are thin and low with just a little wear making them flat on the top. Dave tells us that the zero fret was fitted at the same time as the re-fret instead of replacing the original bone one.

There is some buzzing coming from the B string because the nut at the back of the fret has not been cut deeply enough, so the string hits the top of the fretwire as there is not enough string pressure coming off it. The nut really is only a guide for the strings, but it should be cut to allow the strings freedom when a zero fret is fitted.

With permission granted from Dave, I decide to a little work on this and clean it up. The tang under the fretwire seems to be behind the edge of the fingerboard and glued with the nut, which I don't think looks good, and nor is it best practise. A return to a bone nut would be perfect here and would restore the original spec. The other point is a zero fret on open chords would make the sound somewhat brighter because of the metal instead of the bone.

Having oiled the fingerboard, the rosewood has a lovely dark chocolate look to it and feels much better. Truss rod adjustments are not needed as the clearance is just right, although the action in my opinion is a little too low to achieve clear ringing notes. This could be due to the slight fret wear, but a simple fret dress would sort this out.

The Grover machineheads feel smooth to turn. Sometimes people over-tighten these via the small screw at the end, thinking that it helps to stop them from slipping, but it doesn't; the screw is there to adjust the torque so that it feels comfortable to turn. I've taken the screw completely out of a Grover in the past to test it, and it still stays in tune.

The body design gives great upper fretboard access, and the slim ES-345 neck – which is probably from the mid-'60s – is a thin and very comfortable neck to play. You can't help wondering what happened to the guitar it was originally taken from...

Bridge

John Birch guitars started in Birmingham around 1970, its founder members being John Birch, Arthur Baker, and John Diggins – who later went on to produce Jaydee Guitars. They had some very clever switching on their guitars for the time. John Birch would advertise the parts he made, such as pickups, and also offer his customisation services.

In March 1973 a new bridge, made of stainless steel and designed to replace Gibson's Tun-O-Matic bridge and tailpiece, found its way onto this guitar and was first seen at Slade's Earls Court gig. This very sturdy item had brass pillar inserts with

stainless steel caps to cover the top of the studs. Individual saddles with height adjustment are supplied, and the steel plate they sit on – which is about 1/8th of an inch thick – delivers maximum transference of string energy.

A 'John Birch' inscription is stamped into the steel plate, and just at the back of the bridge on both treble and bass sides is a number that looks like possibly T or C 258, which could make this one of the very earliest ones made. Judging from their condition, the current saddles would seem to be recent ones. Also, on the bass E string side of the bridge, the adjustment screw for intonation is slightly oval. At the back of the saddles, secure springs hold them in place.

Control plate

Back in 1968 Dave's guitar was fitted with Gibson bonnet reflector knobs in black, with a metal toggle in the lower part of the control panel and a jack socket placed higher up. Then, around March 1973, when the current John Birch bridge was fitted, the look changed, with silver-skirted control knobs similar to those you might see on an old Carlsbro amplifier. By the time of *Slade – Live in Winterland San Francisco* gig in April 1975, the lower control knob had become smaller, with a small fin at each end, and one control had been lost altogether. This gig shows a great performance by Slade and really showcases Dave Hill's fast vibrato and control. By 1976, all the knobs were different again.

After this the guitar was not seen much for a time, as Dave was using John Birch guitars and various others. Then, in 1991, Slade released *Radio Wall Of Sound*, and on *TOTP* the guitar could be seen with an extra smaller knob, an idea possibly based on the Rickenbacker blender knob.

The controls at the present time are a little taller and have small grooves on the shafts, but still have chrome reflectors. Interestingly the three-layer plastic control plate is slightly thinner than the main scratchplate, and the toggle switch is also higher up.

As we take the rusty screws off the control plate to see underneath, the first thing to be noticed is that the wires used for both pickups is the wrong type. The humbucker has a brown cable with a blue and braided wire coming out of it: this is soldered to the lower volume control, which is a 500k pot, connected to the tone control with what looks like a Fender .02 ceramic-type capacitor. The neck pickup has a grey-coloured plastic wire that has a red and blue wire coming out of it – something like you'd see on an old table lamp – again connecting to the tone control with the same capacitor.

The potentiometers are unmarked, but of good quality: they could be Centralabs, but the middle tag doesn't look familiar. They look as if they've been in place since 1968, but they're

The forearm chamfer has worn completely smooth

Under the control panel: messy wiring and signs of the original pale colour

The single-coil in the neck position is taken from a Fender Jaguar and the humbucker is probably a Gibson T-bucker from the mid/late '60s

of good quality, and the shafts don't move from side to side like some cheap ones do today. A new jack socket has been fitted, and the whole area has been foil-backed, albeit rather patchily.

Earlier we mentioned the suggestion by people who knew Sam Li that wiring was not his strong point... and now we can see why. It looks as if both pickups have had their wires joined together with anything that was handy, as they obviously could not reach the control cavity with the original length of wire.

Pickups

Over the years there have been a number of suggestions and rumours about what these pickups could actually be, so let's start with the neck pickup. It's a Fender Jaguar pickup from the post-1965 period, not a Strat pickup, as some have thought. The polepieces are staggered, with the two outer poles flush to the cover, the B and A poles just below the rim of the cover, and the D and G raised higher.

The crucial thing is that the metal 'claw' – which is what you would see fitted to the sides of an original Fender Jaguar pickup – has been removed. This claw was used to focus the magnetic field more, not to screen it, and the fact that it's been taken off is probably the reason that most people have assumed this is a Strat pickup. The tell-tale sign, however, is that the top edges are squared, which is an unmistakable Jaguar trait. These pickups used 42AWG wire with formvar insulation, and the average number of turns was around 8550. Early Jaguar pickups tended to measure around 6.26 ohms, but the pickup on Dave's guitar measures 6.14 ohms.

Square-cornered neck single coil was taken from a Fender Jaguar

A sideways look reveals the staggered pickup poles

Note the thickness of the original upper pickguard

Moving on to the humbucker, the situation is complicated by the fact that the screws have gone completely rusty. We do have the tools to take them out, but that would mean sacrificing the original screws, and a mere examination really isn't enough reason to take such a big step. So, it's certainly best to leave them in – it's better than ruining them, and having to source sympathetically-aged replacements. Also, there's a hairline crack on the pickup surround, so even if I did take the pickup out, this old surround may not like it and thus open up. It's probably been on the guitar since 1968, and discretion seems to be the best path.

Still, all is not lost, as I can measure the output from the inside of the guitar. This turns out to be quite this revealing, as the pickup's resistance measures 7.25 ohms. That is very close to the Gibson T-bucker which started to appear from around '65 (it has been said that the 'T' stands for Treble, and it was embossed on the plastic bobbins to help the installer orient the pickup in the right direction). Also, at around the same time the covers changed to chrome, which is what we find on Dave's guitar.

So, this is no PAF pickup as some have suggested, and one clue is that output. Around 1965-'67 (no-one knows for sure) Gibson changed their manually-run pickup winding system to fully automated, and this resulted in a more consistent 7.3 ohms to 7.5 ohms. These pickups had an A5 alnico magnet which provides more of a chiming, toppy quality. The wood of the guitar absorbs certain frequencies and will resonate others, and the pickups translate the frequencies at which the string is vibrating, which is the whole reason why makers use different woods and hardware to affect the tone. Dave's guitar with its dense maple body and stainless John Birch bridge would also tend to emphasise the treble, but the rosewood fingerboard and mahogany neck would add just enough of the midrange to give this guitar a unique voice. Listen to any Slade hit, and no explanation will describe what you can hear: it is a unique sound quite unlike any other guitar I know of, and now we know it's a T-bucker plus a Jaguar pickup, it all begins to make sense.

Summary

There are many well-known guitars out there, instruments that over the years have become embedded in history by being used on stage and in the studio by famous players, but seeing a one-off guitar such as this with its oddball build and unique hardware in the hands of a dynamic player like Dave Hill is something special. For me, '70s rock with its classic, pre-overprocessed sound is hard to beat; this guitar produced some of the most memorable riffs of its time, and many thanks to Dave for letting us take a look.

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DRILLS FOR
THRILLS

Rolling Thunder

Here's a fretting hand technique that will really push you. **Douglas Noble** has the details...

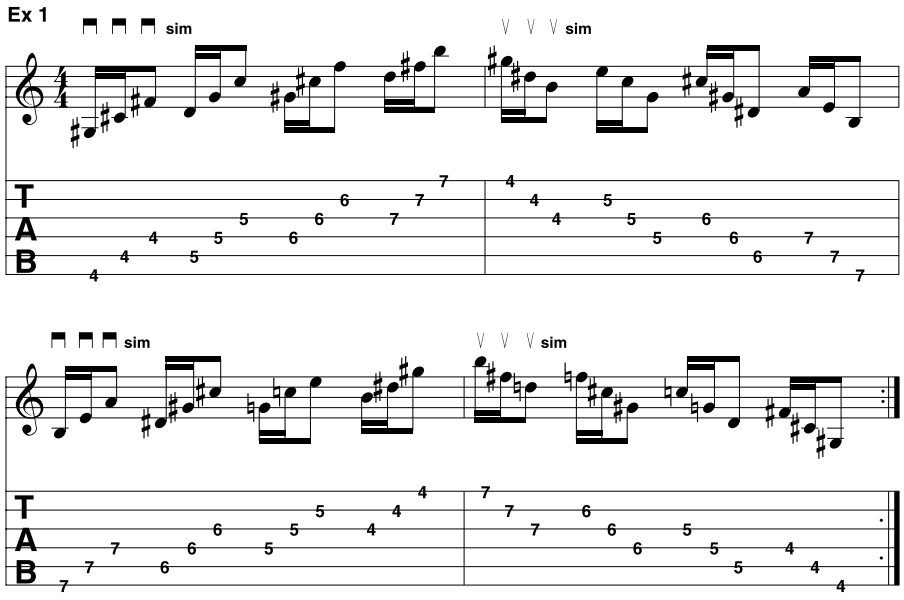
Following on from the last two month's explorations of sweep picking techniques, here's an exercise and a series of licks using a technique often found in sweep picking arpeggios – rolling the fretting hand fingers. Exercise 1 is intended to offer you the opportunity to hone this new style of fingering, then Exercise 2 shows a practical application of the technique as a reward for your efforts. Next month, we'll look at some two-octave arpeggios designed to put together all the techniques explored so far in the recent sweep picking columns. You'll be knocking them dead.

1 EXERCISE 1

4/4 TIME

Finger this exercise using one finger per fret – that's the first finger at the fourth fret, the second finger at the fifth fret, the third finger at the sixth fret and the fourth finger at the seventh fret, which means that the first three notes at the fourth fret are all fingered with the first finger. Here's the important bit: fret the first note on the bottom string with the tip of the finger, and when you fret the next two notes on the fifth and fourth strings, instead of lifting that finger, roll it instead. Don't lift the finger from the fretboard; each note is fretted by a different part of the finger by rolling the finger and by applying the pressure at a different point of the finger for each note. The idea is to have only one note sounding at a time, so practise very, very slowly and listen for one note stopping when the next note starts. Take note: if you haven't used this rolling technique before, you'll find it tricky and it will require considerable patience and perseverance. Use the same method for the rest of the first bar with fingers two, three and four at frets five, six and seven respectively.

The descending pattern in bar 2 is different in that the first note of each group of three notes must be fingered with whichever part of the finger enables the finger to roll and end up with the tip of the finger on the last of the three notes – this depends on the length of one's fingers. Unlike in the ascending pattern in bar 1, as you are playing you can slightly 'push' the fretting hand's wrist forward and slightly lift the hand in order to aid the rolling action. Remember, roll the fingers rather than lifting them, and make sure only one note sounds at a time.



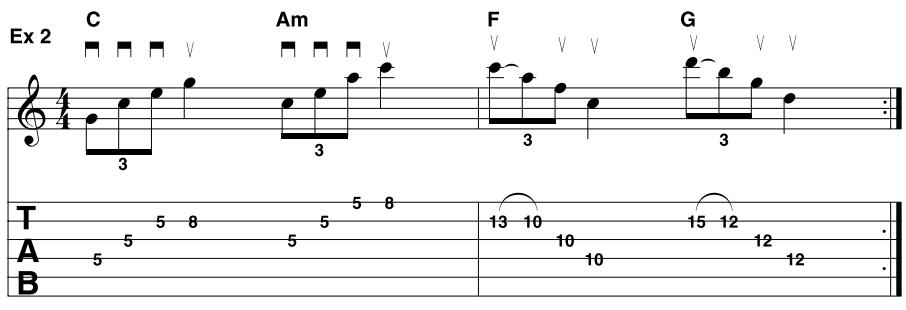
Bars 3 and 4 continue the pattern across the fretboard. Be warned: bar 3 is particularly tough to get right. In reality, you'd be unlikely to play some of these combinations with these fingers, but the point of this exercise is to offer an extreme workout so you can really knock your technique into shape.

2 EXERCISE 2

4/4 TIME

As a spot of light relief, let's look at one practical use of this rolling technique. This exercise is designed to be played with fingers one and four, and the rolling is done with the first finger on either strings four, three and two or the top three strings... so it shouldn't be too tough.

The rolled arpeggios outline the chords of the stock progression they are indicated to be played over – C, Am, F and G. Yet again, make sure only one note sounds at a time. Rather neat, eh?



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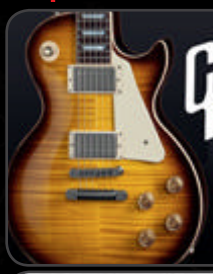
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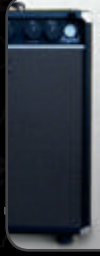

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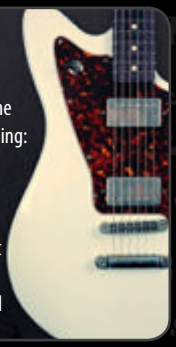

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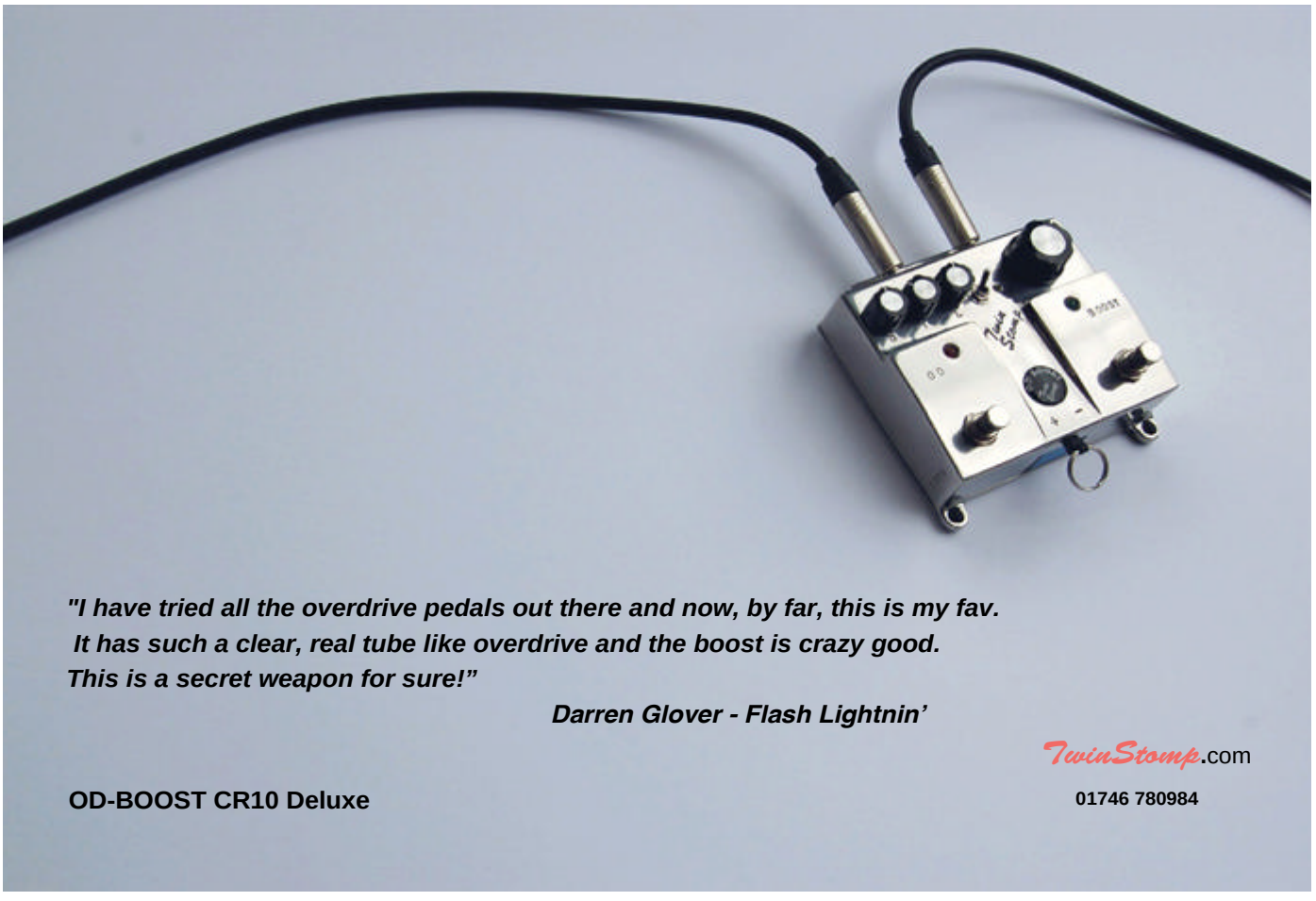

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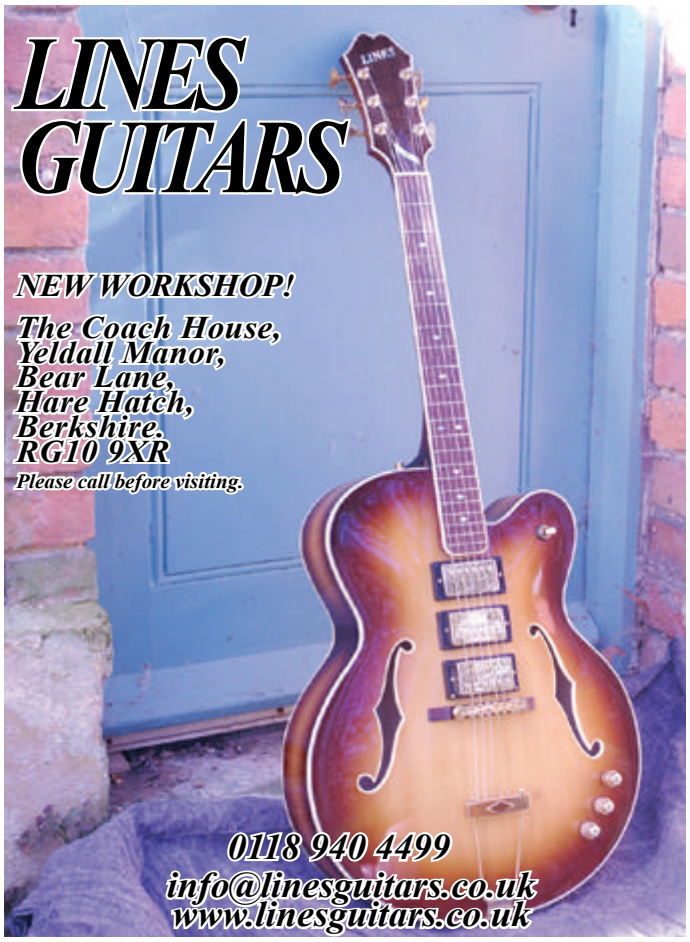

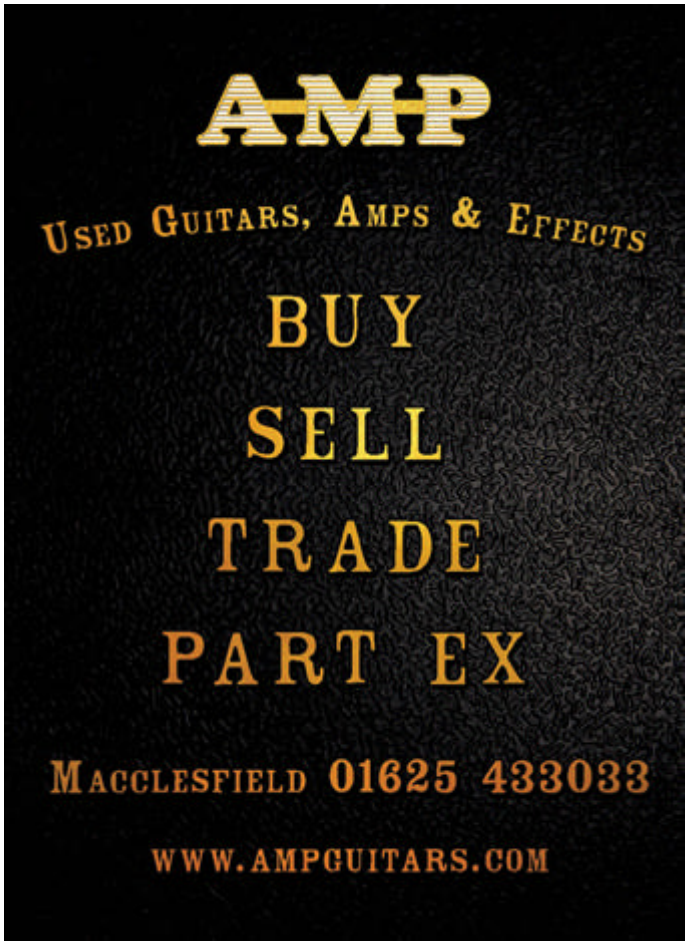

READERS' FREE ADVERTISEMENTS

FOR SALE

Guild F20 acoustic, small bodied with spruce top and mahogany sides and back, made in USA in 1991, vgc with case, £800. Tel: 01865 711827, Oxford area

Peavey Vegas 400 210W, 15" Black Widow, mint condition, light use, never gigged, £450 ono. Tel: 01903 261931

Hughes & Kettner Puretone 25W combo, with cover, good condition, £650. Tel: 01543 899232; Text: 07971 707995 or email: malcsmart@me.com, Staffordshire

Faith Eclipse Saturn, black, as new with hard case, £495. Tel: 07921 928530, Northants

Fender 1974/75 Mustang Bass in s/burst. Serial 589980 (F plate), owned from new, all original. Selling as part of my guitar and bass collection as I don't use this now and it needs to go to a good home, £1400. Tel: 07789 071 549, Ferrybridge, W Yorkshire, buyer to collect

Gibson Les Paul Deluxe goldtop, 1972, one owner, tags, strap, lead, case, DiMarzio pickups and TP6 tailpiece fitted but original pickups and tailpiece included, good condition for year. £3000. Gibson ES-175D sunburst, 1979, one owner, tags, case, good condition, £3000. Heritage Golden Eagle sunburst, 1985, one owner, DeArmond floating pickup fitted but original pickup included in price, £3000. Tel: 07593 398272 or email roger_gill@btinternet.com

Gibson USA Les Paul Studio. Cherry, with EMG 81-85 humbuckers and Gibson gig bag, £475. Tel: 02920 408497 or email: lmsjones@sky.com

K.Yairi 60th Anniversary 12-string, beautiful guitar with sitka spruce top and maple sides and back, fitted with Vanden Mimesis soundhole pickup, now marketed by Fishman as the Rare Earth pickup. £335 ono. Email: geofftate264@gmail.com, Newcastle

Fender 1x12" Deluxe 22W valve combo, mint condition, £900. Mesa/Boogie Rectoverb 25W watt 1x12" combo, mint condition, £1000. Mesa/Boogie Nomad 45W 1x12" combo, mint condition, £600. Tel: 07935 607035, Northern Ireland

Three Copicat echoes, one in good working order the other two need to be serviced, asking price for them is £175, would sell together or separately. Email: aonroi@gmail.com

Cornell Romany Pro 2x10 20W, all-valve amp, switchable from 20-10-5-2 watts, custom made, £1200 or swap for Heritage or Gibson 335. Tel: 07973 187375

Left-handed DeArmond Starfire Special, cherry red, Bigsby, no case, £400. Tanglewood TW-55 electro-acoustic, gig bag, £350. Both mint. Tel: Simon 07887 952916, Cumbria

WEM Watkins Rapier 44, red guitar, great example of '60s imagery, £250 ono. Guitar case, 1960s, fair condition, maroon interior, £40 ono. Tel: 020 8803 5337, London

Admira classical Sombra model, solid spruce top, 12 months old, excellent condition, includes hardcase, £150 ono. Call Mathew on 07487 657522, Morecombe

Gibson 1957 Les Paul Junior, the real deal, original case and Hiscox, £6500. Boss FA-1, amazing condition, boxed with instructions and period brochure, no belt clip, £300. Tel: 07816 404742 or email studuke@hotmail.com, Devon

Parker Nitefly, USA, black, DiMarzio humbucker, Parker gig bag, fantastic condition, £999. BC Rich Mockingbird, NJ Series, quilted antique natural, walnut body stringers, 24-fret ebony fingerboard, Ritter gig bag, mint, £499. Epiphone Prophecy GX custom SG, black cherry, coil-tapped Gibson Dirty Fingers, 24-fret ebony board, speedtaper neck, mint, boxed, £450. Fender Japan Telecaster, candy apple red, rosewood fingerboard, 21 frets, £525. Tel: 01933 222766. Wellingborough, Northants.

Mesa/Boogie TA-30 combo, two fully independent channels, five style modes, awesome tones, as new, £1000. Tel: Albert 01959 534190/07759 293536 or email albert.akint@gmail.com

Vox AC30 vintage amp, serviced, purchased in 1961 from George Clay's in Broad Street, Birmingham, £1600, buyer to collect. Tel: 07811 293370, Southampton

Left-handed Fender USA Strat, white, rosewood board, 2011, as new, £650. Left-handed Vintage Lemon Drop, as new, £240. Tel: 01723 447932, Yorks

Gibson 1989 Chet Atkins Country Gent, beautiful walnut finish, curly maple top, back and sides, ebony board, Gibson at its best, £2650 ono. Tel: Barry 07790 593731 or email bknott@sky.com, Bath/Bristol

Gibson Les Paul Standard, honeyburst, 2001, excellent condition, Gibson hard case, £1200 ovno. Tel: Rob 07894 074755

1980s vintage pedals, US Pro-Co Rat, £60, Pearl analogue delay, £60. Tel: 07939 081504, West Yorkshire

Walden G630ce electro-acoustic in perfect condition, with Stagg hardcase, £250 ono. Tel: Mike 07901 747176, Surrey

Left-handed Heritage H-575 custom shop, antique natural with upgraded woods, chrome hardware, SD-'59s, pro setup, immaculate, Hiscox case, £1995. Tel: 07761 233330, Somerset

Early 1970s Orange OR120 head plus 4x12" cab, £900. WEM 1x12" 17W valve combo, vgc, £350. Thunderbird 76 bass, vgc. £2850. 1967 EB-3 bass, unbroken, £2200. Tel: 0777 327 6815, Kendal, Westmoreland

1950s Selmer lap steel Pro Hawaiian, all original, including gigbag, £350. Tel: Gary 020 8207 5015 or email Fiona.zg@sky.com for jpegs

Fender Deluxe Reverb 1979, home use only, c/w footswitches, owners manual, very good condition, £950. Tel: 01159 285075, Nottingham

Gretsch G400C Sychromatic jazz guitar, 17" body, 25.5" scale, tobacco sunburst, single floating pickup, vol & tone, beautiful deep-bodied guitar, all paperwork, Gretsch hardcase, immaculate, £1495. Tel: 01622 688001, Kent

Fender Squier Bass VI, sunburst, perfect condition, gig bag, £220 ono. Also, Shure SM58, old but good, £30. Tel: 07748 459986 after 7pm, Croydon area

Fender FM212R amp, as new, £130. Peavey Predator Strat, £120. Ibanez Roadstar with two DiMarzios plus one Ibanez single-coil, £185. DiMarzio Cruiser pickup, £50. DiMarzio humbucker, £30. Scratchplate with two DiMarzio humbuckers plus one Ibanez single-coil, plus electrics and switches, £95. Ibanez humbucker, £30. Two Celestion speakers, G12L35, £50. Tel: 07830 444829, Liverpool

Epiphone Emperor Swingster archtop guitar, wine red, licensed B30 Bigsby, Swingbucker pickups, great for rockabilly/jazz/rock, hard case. Tel: 07966 217971, Durham

Musicman Sterling Sub Halen model, maple neck, blue, £200. Tel: 01492 512954, North Wales.

Ashdown Sub Octave Plus bass pedal, £40. Casio DG10 digital guitar, £100. Peavey Session bass amp, 200W, 4 ohms, USA, £100. Tel: 07710 147205, Beds

Fender American Standard Stratocaster in mint condition, deep red colour, rosewood fingerboard. Fender hardcase. £625. Tel: Mike 01273 588685/07771 753386, Peacehaven, East Sussex

Pickups: set of 3 1988 US Standard Strat (Squier upgrade?) £60; DiMarzio HS3 Strat bridge £40; David White Old Glories Tele neck, £40. All as new. Tel: Brian 07904 184047

Fender American Standard 60th Anniversary Tele. Beautiful sunburst finish/rosewood board. New condition with top quality SKB lockable case, £750. Info and pics supplied upon request. Email: geofftate264@gmail.com, Newcastle

Gibson SG STD, 2012, Ltd Edition honeyburst, split coil zebra burstbuckers, slim neck, scarce model, showroom condition, Gibson fitted case, £850 ono. Tel: 07745 908037, Aberdeen

PRS McCarty 2010, sunburst, moon inlays, excellent condition with case, tools and documents, £1150. Tel Mick: 01671 820954

Gibson Custom Shop Keb Mo Bluesmaster acoustic, vintage sunburst, Gibson hard case, one year old, £1250. Tel: 01255 435967, Essex

Gibson Les Paul Traditional 2009, honeyburst, Classic 57 pickups and all standard, quite light for a Trad model at 8lbs 11ozs, Gibson case and candy all intact, excellent condition throughout, £1150. Tel Mick: 01671 820954

Epiphone Dove Pro electro-acoustic, violinburst, Fishman pickup, Epi case, immaculate £270 ono; Aria Pro, '70s LP, red with stripped top, £160. Tel: Kev 01536 203200, Corby

Cornell 10W all-valve for sale, £500 or swap for Blues Junior plus cash. Tel: CJ, 07973 187375

Gibson ES-335 Dot Plain Top cherry red 2012 with hardcase COA, £1800 ovno. Tel: Adam 07872 318288, Feltham, Middx

Roland RE-501 Space Echo, new condition, turned on every two months, bought at Rock City from Bill White in 1980, instructions and bill of sale included, £300. Tel: 07836 268687, Newcastle

Fender Hotrod Deluxe MkII, unused, £495 or will p/x for Blues Junior MkII plus cash; Fender 2004 Anniversary Strat, pristine, unused, custom case, £1098. For the pair, £1584. Tel: Tony 01442 876740, Herts

Marshall 1987X 50W valve head in flightcase with Marshall 1960AX greenbacks 4x12" 100W cab, cover, sounds massive, immaculate, £1195 ono. Tel: 01386 861873 or text 07979 793681

Line 6 Guitar Variax 300 sunburst, in excellent condition, never gigged, £275, Email: g@wescal.co.uk, West Yorkshire

Fender Jazzmaster '65 AVRI, sunburst, unplayed, Fender brown case, £1500. Tel: 07702 216502 or email davidmumford@me.com, Hereford

Celestion G12M Greenback speaker, 16 Ohm, 25W, new, unused, £50+p&p; Celestion G10 'Ten 30' speaker, 8 Ohm, new, unused £25+p&p; Jensen C10R speaker, 8 Ohm, new, unused £25+p&p. Tel: Tony 01296 738486 or email tony.cox7@btinternet.com, N Bucks

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Digitech RP-6 or RP-7. Must be good condition and price, may collect. Tel: 07923 801153

Mesa/Boogie Express 5:25, good condition, prefer London area. Tel: Mick 020 8530 1208

Epiphone Firebird VII, Vibrola gold cover, good price paid. Tel: Chris 07841 160921

Award-Session Stockton amp wanted. Tel: 07887 972019, Lanarkshire

Vintage Paradise guitar. Txt/call: Andy 07944 651798 or email delavigne@btinternet.com

Fender soft-V neck wanted for Baja Tele, vgc or as new. Tel: 01429 296413, Teesside

Squier Super-Sonic Japan, late '90s, blue sparkle preferred. Call Ron 01384 873390, Stourbridge

Trace Elliot TA200, Tel: Dave 01438 880446, Herts.

Yamaha SG200 wanted, pearl white. Tel/txt: 07710 161598 or Chris-r1968@ hotmail.co.uk

Gibson Les Paul R9 Plaintop 1997-2003 Historic Custom Shop, original to 'player'condition, fair price paid. Tel: 07814 797163 or email glen1149@hotmail.com, Devon

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Soundtrack of my life

Laurence Jones

Blues, blues and blues is the young guitarist's stock-in-trade, and his favourite albums harbour some serious mojo

Back in 2012 he was still a teen sensation when debut album *Thunder In The Sky* heralded Laurence Jones, rather modestly, as the hottest guitar player in Stratford-Upon-Avon. The Rory Gallagher comparisons flew thick and fast, and now with his third long player *What's It Gonna Be* hitting the shelves you might want to expand his patch to perhaps the Midlands, Britain... hell, even Europe and beyond, as there are few who can light up a fretboard like this lad can. Now signed to Germany's home of the blues, Ruf Records, Jones toured all around the continent in 2014 as part of Ruf's famed Blues Caravan package and his reputation has spread to all corners. Jones' songwriting appears to have matured on his travels too, and his burgeoning potential is becoming impossible to ignore. A guitar hero in the making, and for many decades to come.

Walter Trout

TRANSITION

This was given to me as a gift, and it was my first blues album. It came out in 1992, the year I was born. I know every note. I absolutely played it to death. *Running In Place* is a special song. Walter became my inspiration, I love his style, he just made the guitar talk. He's become a great friend and mentor.

Stevie Ray Vaughan

IN STEP

This is the ultimate blues album. It's the Texas shuffle, and Texas blues doesn't come any better. 12-bar can often sound much the same whoever's playing, but when SRV does it becomes something different – even when he plays slow there's a certain energy there. *Leave My Girl Alone* is played with such emotion.

Jeff Beck Group

BECK-OLA

I found this in an old record shop when I was about 15. It's Rod Stewart singing, who I love, and the sound is so raw! There's a version of *Jailhouse Rock* on here that opened my eyes to how you can make a song your own, it's so different. You can hear Beck is still developing, he's playing his heart out and finding himself.

BB King & Eric Clapton

RIDING WITH THE KING

They're both at their best with nothing to prove, just getting together to do a record and have fun. The guitar is amazing. They both have unique styles, and when they play off each other it's like they're having a conversation. To hear two masters, who are so different, playing the same music is what makes it so great.

Luther Allison

LET'S TRY IT AGAIN

This is a special record for me. It was my first Luther album, it's on Ruf Records who I'm now signed to, and Thomas Ruf has given me the goldtop Les Paul Luther plays on here. It's live and he's not afraid to go for it – he plays so many notes, but with such emotion. He really is one of the great Chicago players.

The Jimi Hendrix Experience

ELECTRIC LADYLAND

This was the first vinyl LP I ever listened to and it blew my mind. I heard *Voodoo Chile* and I sat down and I learned it note for note. I wanted to do what people used to do, to sit and learn from the vinyl with no rewind. *All Along The Watchtower* really hit me and I still I play it live. I think this album is completely timeless.

The Groundhogs

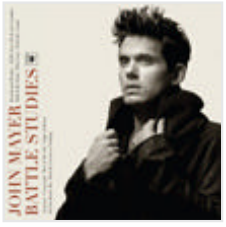
SPLIT

This was my dad's favourite band and they're one of the first I ever saw live. Tony McPhee took the blues further, you could call it a progressive blues rock album. I love *Split Part 2* (there's four parts in total), he's kind of chugging away with a wah wah and I've never heard a sound like it. It's a strange and unique record.

John Mayer

BATTLE STUDIES

I don't listen to much modern music but I like this because it's kind of a crossover record, he's almost tricked a pop audience into listening to the blues. I've never heard a pop record with this many guitar solos! He doesn't scare people away with crazy soloing, it's all very melodic. *Half Of My Heart* kind of symbolises his style.



Albert King & Stevie Ray Vaughan

IN SESSION

Some people don't like this, they say it's too raw, they're just jamming – but that's why I love it. It's literally like you're in the studio with them, listening in. Stevie doesn't have a clue what he's going to play because Albert is just calling them out. You can tell Stevie is playing with his hero and loving it, it brings out the best in him.

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